The Role of Art in Memory: Case Study of Joseph Beuys and Kara Walker

Author: Jennifer Thibault

The Role of Art in Memory: Case Study of Joseph Beuys and Kara Walker

by

Jennifer M. Thibault

An Undergraduate Thesis for the Honors Program

And for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts with Honors in

German Studies

Of the College of Arts and Science at Boston College

May 2007

Thesis Committee:

Advisor: Rachel A Freudenburg, Ph.D.

Professor of German Studies

Department Chair: Michael Resler, Ph. D.

Professor of German Studies

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Professor Rachel A Freudenburg for her enormous help as an advisor, the editing of numerous drafts, and for her patience throughout the whole process. Thanks to Christie, Chris, Eve, and Atlas for sharing my pain and for being receptive ears, resourceful minds, and friendly faces. To Jeff for his immeasurable help in editing and to my roommates for listening to me vent all these months. Lastly, to my family who has supported me in everything.

Jennifer M. Thibault

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Introduction

Starting with a historical knowledge of philosophy and with writings on memory and forgiveness, I will seek to understand and convey the difficulties artists face when they confront the injustices, prejudices, and criminal histories of their own contexts. Currently, I am researching German installation artist, Joseph Beuys, and will use him as lens for looking at a German artist's reaction and handling of the trauma of World War II through art. Next, I will look at Kara Walker, a current African American modern artist working to create a critical understanding of America's racial past through art and who seeks to explore, as well, contemporary racial and gender stereotypes.

Jacques Derrida's concept of forgiveness in his 1997 book, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness,[1] is both compelling and profoundly relevant to Germany's experiences during and after World War II and to the experience of African Americans in early American history. Derrida says that if one is prepared only to forgive what appears forgivable then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. Rather it is mortal sin, the thing that in religious language is the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm, that is the true object of forgiveness. Forgiveness then is seen as only that which forgives the unforgivable.

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[1] Derrida, Jacques. On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness. Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. (Oxon: Routledge, 2001.) 27-30.

German social critic Theodor Adorno is famous for his 1949 injunction in his "Cultural Criticism and Society," "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." [2] Although the problem of evil is certainly not new, Adorno argued the Holocaust imposed new limits on morally conscientious art. For Adorno, the very act of creating art would be a kind of betrayal, in which the aesthetic would overtake the moral. His statement came to function as a moral and aesthetic dictum for the postwar era and affected the areas of literature, art, and film. Adorno's postwar dictum, as Lisa Saltzman suggests, carried the force of a biblical prohibition—that of the Second Commandment, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images, or any likeness of any thing that is in the heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." [3] This implication, showing a world devoid of images, left the postwar era and postwar artists with an aesthetic ethics of visual absence and poetic silence, for the Second Commandment implies that God *cannot* be portrayed. Nothing, whether it be God, or something from the earth or the sea, could be represented. In addition, it indicts the prospect of forming an image, for it is impossible to represent the unrepresentable. Thus, Adorno's literal suggestion of the barbarism of poetry is interpreted as the impossibility of any form of aesthetic representation. God and the Holocaust are aligned and Adorno's postwar dictum becomes the result of

[2] Adorno, Theodor. "Cultural Criticism and Society," in Prisms. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. (London: Neville Spearman, 1967.) 34.
[3] Saltzman, Lisa. Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz. (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 1999.) 17.

history, of Auschwitz, and a manifestation of the Second Commandment prohibition. This presented a major problem for artists, whose work was completely intertwined with use of image and word.

Abstraction then became the only type of painting that Adorno believed avoided "that which Auschwitz and the Hebrew Bible expressly forbid."[4] Adorno's dictum against the aesthetic and his taboo on sensuality, on anything that is material, challenged and loomed over artists across Europe during the postwar era. Engendered by the Holocaust, Adorno's dictum is paradoxical in that the very horror and singularity of the Holocaust forbids expression, while at the same time the Shoah demands remembrance. This conundrum of memory, then, is what artists throughout Europe responded to, reacting both personally and publicly to Adorno's words through their art.

Adorno's influence across all the arts had a huge impact even on non-German artists. German-born artist Joseph Beuys similarly struggled with choice of medium and his own personal complicity in World War II Germany. A similar struggle with artistic form can be seen in the example of French filmmaker, Alain Resnais, who traveled to Auschwitz in 1955 to make his movie *Night and Fog*. Once there, he doubted the ability of the camera to capture the true memory of the location's traumatic events. Resnais recognized the inherent danger in the media of photography and film documentary as its ability to distort historical realities, depending on

[4] Saltzman 1999, 20.

the use of cropping, contextualization, and juxtaposition. Techniques such as these use photography's legitimacy to sever the photograph from the past, even more so than a memory image. Furthermore, photographs can create a sense of understanding within the viewer, a sense of mastery that is too easy, of traumatic moments or periods in human history. It can also victimize the subjects or exploit them.

Resnais seems to point to the overestimation of the veracity of this medium, questioning how textual, visual, and televisual cultures mediate an individual's relationship to the past. He asks important questions about how an artist records and thereby remembers. The inherent changing of memory through the means of representation is the paradoxical condition of remembrance.[5] In this example of Resnais we see the growing concern and interest by artists for the concept of memory in relation to work on World War II and The Holocaust, the "ultimate human tragedy." He, like Beuys, is inextricably tied to the specific struggles of the place he grew up and the culture he inhabited, and explores questions of social and cultural displacement. His answer is one that cannot be recorded exactly, yet one must try.

There is an absence of beauty and aesthetics in much of Beuys's work, often even a deliberate ugliness, such as in *Auschwitz Demonstration* (1968). This work suggests Beuys's meditation on the horror of the Holocaust and on Adorno's words about the inability of the

[5]Fogel, Douglas. "Volatile Memories." No Place Like Home, ed. Kathleen Mclean. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997.) 116.

German artist to create anything beautiful after the Holocaust. Beuys's art, which is sculptural art with a social agenda, is called "plastic art" (*Plastik)* and developed largely in opposition to the artistic silence in post-World War II Germany. Beuys's *Plastik* and his own amazing personal story and presence that make his work so pivotal for questions of memory, forgiveness, and national identity.

It is for the reason of Beuys's effort that his work is so important for it resists the "photographic" assertion of definite truth, but rather offers up a conflict of interpretations.[6] Likewise, African American artist Kara Walker's work reacts against neat conclusions. Both work against taboos and stereotypes and resist defining the viewer's reaction or imposing their belief system on the viewer.

Starting from the contexts of Derrida, I'd like to investigate how both Joseph Beuys and Kara Walker address questions of forgiveness. Both embrace representation, as well as acknowledge a past inhumanity. Beuys, however, is more focused on redemption and Walker on the lingering effect of the "ultimate human tragedy" on the modern person. I will look at the African American artist, Kara Walker, and investigate her work with history and the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in relation to Beuys.

[6] Biro, Matthew. "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust." The Yale Journal of Criticism v. 16. (Yale University and The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 116-117.

I. Joseph Beuys's Biography

Joseph Beuys wanted to be remembered in death as someone who had an impact on history. Now, in the twenty-first century, Joseph Beuys is not only considered one of the most influential artists of the post- World War II period in Europe, but has left behind the legacy and following of a cult figure. His fascinating personality and zest for life aside, Joseph Beuys deserves acclaim for his contribution to sculptural theory and his use of art to influence the world. In studying Beuys, it is important to examine his personal life and early influences in order to understand his public works, for the world is Beuys's art. He termed this vibrant and dynamic idea about sculpture that was active in the world, "Social Sculpture." This concept, however, developed over time and was especially influenced by his near death encounter in the Crimea during his formative years as a Nazi pilot during World War II. To understand Beuys's work fully, one must be acquainted with his early life, his experiences during the war, and study at the Düsseldorf Academy.

Early Life

Joseph Beuys was born on May 12, 1921 in Krefeld, Germany to his parents, Joseph Jacob and Johanna Beuys of Kleve, Germany. Joseph Jr. did not have a very close relationship with either his reserved mother, or his father, a strict businessman. As a student and person he had a

somewhat wild temperament and was known for his whimsical pranks and jokes at school. Despite his antics, Beuys was well liked by both teachers and students and known to his friends and neighbors as "dat Jüppken," "our Joey" in the Lower Rhine dialect. In addition to racing down the stairs of his Hindenburg secondary school on a bicycle, he ran away one year before graduation with a traveling circus.[7] His parents soon found him, however, and brought him home to finish school. Beuys admits that as an adolescent he took advantage of opportunities to sow his "wild oats," suggesting a time that was quite inviting for such a wild spirit.

Beuys was greatly influenced by the landscape, myths, and history of Kleve and of the Lower Rhine. The founding counts of Kleve can be traced back to Lohengrin, the knight of the swan, who was the son of Parzifal, knight of the Holy Grail. Beuys always had a special liking for swans and mythical stories, such as the one demonstrated by Lohengrin. Kleve, with its beauty, tales, and landscape was ideal for the nurturing of Beuys's imaginative sprit and development. Beuys even claimed his first memories to be those of the clouds and the blue sky from when he was eighteen months! His love of nature and botany led him to keep a plant collection in his parents' house and a log of all his observations in a notebook. He and his friends had small "exhibitions," where Beuys would gather and categorize things such as beetles, mice, rats, frogs, fish, and

[7] Stachelhaus, Heiner. Joseph Beuys. Trans. David Britt. (New York : Abbeville Press, 1991) 9-13.

flies for display. [8] His amateur excursions into science and interest in botany stayed with him his whole life. Even Beuys's wait for the streetcar to school at the Iron Man, a monument erected in 1653 under Governor Nassau, later developed into his 1976 installation, *Strassenbahnhaltestelle,* or Tram Stop.[9]

Although Beuys's free nature led him to rebel when he was younger, he also had a sense of responsibility to others. In 1940, before the general draft note was sent, he and a friend volunteered to go into the military out of a sense of duty and community for his fellow peers. He defended his decision, saying, "I did not want to be treated differently."[10] His entry into the German military wasn't the only serious stage of his adolescent years; even in high school Beuys was deeply aware of the dark side of life. His intellectual side and quest for knowledge shone while still in high school. Beuys became deeply interested in existential questions and read much on mythology, Romanticism, and Symbolism.[11]

Beuys's literary influences were instrumental in his development as a spiritual and mystical person. Already an individual inclined towards the mythical, after reading the German Romantic poet known as Novalis and the tragic death of his lover, he began to equate man's transcendence of death with the resurrection of Christ. In addition to Novalis, Beuys also

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8 Rosenthal, Mark, Sean Rainbird, and Claudia Schmuckli. Joseph Beuys Actions, Vitrines, Environments. (Houston: Yale University Press, 2004) 150.
9 Stachelhaus 1991, 11-12.
10 Rosenthal 2004, 152.
11 Stachelhaus 1991, 16.

read the Belgian Symbolist writer, Maurice Maeterlinck, author of The Life of the Bee. Maeterlinck was an important influence for he wrote on mystical pantheism. Beuys was also familiar with the Norwegian novelist, Knut Hamsun, who added to his body of knowledge about Norse mythology. Paracelsus, Goethe, and Leonardo da Vinci taught Beuys cosmology and anthropology. These teachings complemented his lifelong study of Rudolf Steiner, a late nineteenth century Austrian philosopher and social thinker.[12]

Beuys' early learning and reading of Steiner's Three-fold Commonwealth influenced his own sculptural theory and belief that "everyone is an artist." Steiner's Three-fold Commonwealth described a social movement which aimed at reforming society by increasing the independence of society's three realms (economy, polity and culture) in such a way that those three realms could mutually correct each other in an ongoing process. It was a part of his philosophy of Anthroposophy, which maintains that anyone who "conscientiously cultivates sense-free thinking" can attain experience of and insights into the spiritual world. This type of thinking, along with the Steiner passage below, thought to have been studied by Beuys, made a huge impression on the young artist:

> Half a century after setting up its imperial edifice, the German nation was confident that it would endure forever….What are the causes of this fatal error? This question must cause reflection in the souls of those who make up the German nation. Whether the strength for such reflection can be mustered today is the issue upon

[12] Stachelhaus 1991, 35-38.

> which the survival of the German nation hangs. Its future hangs on its ability to ask itself, in all seriousness, one question: how did I go wrong? If the nation faces this question today, then the awareness will dawn that half a century ago it founded an empire but neglected to set that empire a task arising from the essence of German national identity. [13]

Steiner wrote about a kind of personal responsibility that Beuys was quickly starting to identify with. Evidenced by his volunteerism in the war, his sense of duty and responsibility would lead him later to say, "It's not up to the politicians, there's no point in swearing at them." Though Beuys eventually became political, it is also important to recognize the skepticism toward nationalism present in the quote. This skepticism became an increasingly fixed characteristic of the German people at this time, one Beuys was aware of, and one which had consequences on the formation of a new national identity. Even before the war, his decision to enlist was complicated because he was fighting for a country with an empty national pride. More positively, Steiner's beliefs implied a vast interconnectedness between people, communities, and nations as each individual theoretically would exhibit their human capacity. This "can do" attitude translated to Beuys' artwork, where he tried to inspire new insights, make things happen, inform his audience and transform the world.[14]

Steiner is not the only creative thinker that would be ultimately connected to Beuys. One of the most important experiences of Beuys's

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[13] Harlan, Volker and Shelley Sacks. What is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys. ed. Harlan Volker. (London: Clairview Books, 2004) 38.
[14] Sacks, Shelley, Preface, What is Art? Conversations with Joseph Beuys, by Volker Harlan and Shelley Sacks, ed. Harlan Volker. (London: Clairview Books, 2004) 2.

early years was his exposure to the work of the German Expressionist sculptor, Wilhelm Lehmbruck. Beuys gained this opportunity in a 1938 book burning in the school yard of his high school in Kleve, where he rescued a catalog of reproductions of sculptures by Lehmbruck. Beuys's life and Lehmbruck's have many things in common.. Both showed early signs of artistic talent, studied at the Düsseldorf Academy, and were master students under teachers who put the greatest emphasis on craftsmanship and technical perfection. Both sought to walk the fine line between classical tradition and newer more modern tendencies in art. Probably the most interesting existential analog is that both artists experienced deep depression around the age of thirty-five. When Beuys discovered this last parallel in 1938, Lehmbruck was thereafte ever present in Beuys's mind.

In 1986, after winning the Wilhelm Lehmbruck Prize, Beuys payed homage to Lehmbruck in his acceptance speech for inspiring him to tackle sculpture. During the speech, he spoke of a semi-mystical experience where he found a little book by chance, in which he discovered a sculpture by Lehmbruck that spoke to him. The book told him that he was the one to protect art and in Beuys's revelation he recounts, "'Everything is sculpture, the picture more of less told me. And in the picture I saw a torch, I saw a flame, and I heard: 'Protect the flame!'"[15] This symbolic

[15] Stachelhaus 1991, 13.

passing of the torch before his death is one that Beuys paid homage to in his tribute to Lehmbruck just a few months before his death.

Lehmbruck had written a poem about the flame that went: "Protect the flame; for if the flame is not protected, before one knows it, the wind will soon quench the light it has kindled. Then break, thou piteous heart, silent with pain."[16] The metaphor of the flame became important for Beuys, for it synthesized the concepts of time, warmth, and space in Lehmbruck's mission. It was Lehmbruck who formed Beuys's initial and base understanding of sculpture, sculpture which crossed thresholds, which stood for inner experience, and was not contained or grasped in the visual. For Beuys, these concepts were both revolutionary and exciting. It opened up entirely different organs of perception that had never been present before in sculpture, namely those of hearing, thinking, and willing.[17] Though his adherence to this innovative type of sculpture was to bring him much conflict at the Düsseldorf Academy, it nevertheless laid the foundation for his unique art and radical philosophy of art that was later to bring him fame.

Beuys put faith in the numinous, so when in 1919 he read Rudolf Steiner's Appeal to the German People and the Civilized World of 1919 and saw Lehmbruck was one of the founding committee members, he took it as Lehmbruck's last tribute to art and a sign to him. In the same year, it came to Beuys's attention that Rudolf Steiner's work aimed at creating an

[16] Stachelhaus 1991, 15.
[17] Stachelhaus 1991, 14.

organization that would "effectively found a new social organism." The relationship between myth, Beuys's private life, and science were to remain with him into his years as an artist and to be the foundation for his concept of Social Sculpture that was to take the art world of 1945 Germany and Europe by storm.

Beuys's Military Life

In 1940 Beuys set off for an air communications school in Posen. Despite Beuys's individualism he joined the *Luftwaffe*, the German air force. However, Beuys was fortunate to have been assigned to Heinz Sielmann, an instructor who was a nature lover and intellectual, and who recognized Beuys as a unique individual. Sielmann was a corporal four years Beuys's senior, and had been a biology and zoology student, as well as an amateur filmmaker. Sielmann appreciated Beuys's free-spiritedness, typically condemned as "insubordination" in the military, and acted as Beuys's protector by making Beuys his orderly, a soldier who acted as a kind of servant and confidant to a superior.[18] In this position, Beuys became a cook, messenger, radio operator, and member of a small philosophy group led by the head of the Posen barracks armory, Hermann Ulrich Asemissen.

In his position as an orderly while in the military school, Beuys did more than just learn. He saw combat and won the Iron Cross twice (Second Class and then First Class) and the Golden Badge for the

[18] Stachelhaus 1991,18-19.

Wounded, the German equivalent of the Purple Heart.[19] While serving as a pilot and radio operator in World War II, he was wounded a total of five times.

It was in the winter of 1943 that the famous encounter with the Tartars supposedly took place.[20] After an attack on a Russian antiaircraft position, Beuys's plane was hit and the altimeter suddenly failed. When the plane crash landed during a blizzard, Beuys was hurled out of the cockpit and pinned under the tail. He lost consciousness and his crewman was killed. It was a miracle that he survived. He owes his life to the Tartars, who found his wrecked Stuka in the snow and who nursed him back to consciousness. For eight days he remained with them in their tents. They salved his injuries with animal fat, wrapped him in felt, and fed him milk, curds, and cheese. Beuys's injuries included a smashed nose, broken ribs, legs, and arms. The Germans finally found him and took him to a military hospital, apparently despite the Tartar's supplications that Beuys stay with them. After a full recovery, Beuys was reassigned to frontline duty and sent to northern Holland. By the end of the war, Beuys had been wounded four more times, his spleen had been removed, and in 1945 he was put in a British prisoner-of-war camp in

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19 MacRitche, Lynn. "On a Mission to Heal a Wounded World." Financial Times 7 February 2005.
< http://www.ft.com/cms/s/c6f4b418-792d-11d9-89c5-00000e2511c8.html>.
20 Stachelhaus 1991, 21.

Cuxhaven, Germany. Thanks to Beuys's friendship with Sielmann, though, he described his war years as a "learning experience."[21]

Beuys's Life after the War

In between Beuys's war experience and his life at art school in Düsseldorf he again met up with his army friend, Heinz Sielmann, and worked on a documentary film, *Song of the Wild*. In Heiner Stachelbach's book, Joseph Beuys, Sielmann saw a change in his friend and noted that Beuys had become much more hypersensitive than before. Sielmann's words also seem to imply an internal growth or trauma and a special connection to surroundings and materials. Though development was to make him very successful later, it was not initially embraced at the State Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, which he entered in 1947. As luck would have it, Beuys was placed under sculptor Joseph Enseling, an academician only concerned with pure representation. As Heiner Stachelbach explains, "for all those who had been through the war and experienced its terror, suffering, and death, all this belonged to a different world, the old world."[22] The "this" in Stachelbach's statement refers precisely to the pure representation that Enseling valued and practiced, which contrasted Beuys's interest in the symbolic importance of materials. Fortunately for Beuys, his study under Enseling came to an end and he found himself a more like-minded professor.

[21] Stachelhaus 1991, 24.
[22] Stachelhaus 1991, 27-28.

Under the guidance of the stern Academy instructor, Ewald Mataré, an artist condemned by the Nazis as degenerate in the 1930's and former director of the academy, Beuys began developing his unique artistic style. Mataré resigned as acting director in January of 1946 to allow for the implementation of his reform of art education, creating classroom communities that remained together for the entirety of their studies. Beuys was a part of this new system and was one of Mataré's most avid students, even though the two had a love-hate relationship. They clashed because of differences in technique and also because of competitiveness in areas of similar interest. Both were serious about their role as artists and Beuys's very deep understanding of Mataré's work seemed to some, including Mataré, to border on pretension. Though Beuys showed an unusual and precocious sensitivity to sculptural materials, in 1958 Mataré convinced a majority in the Senate of the Academy to deny Beuys's desire for a position as an Academy teacher.[23]

In the early 1950's, because of financial worries and lack of public acclaim, Beuys started deepening his knowledge of science trying to develop his own brand of art, which he later called "Social Sculpture." In "Social Sculpture." society as a whole was to be regarded as one great work of art with each individual an active participant in the final creation. Beuys's unconventionality shows through here for even his language was a part of his art. This is due to the concept of "Social Sculpture" as being

[23] Stachelhaus 1991, 33.

all encompassing and being very much situated in the world. Later audiences would be surprised at how well articulated and original his speech was. Beuys, however, was very intentional in his speech, believing language to be a key aspect in his vision of all-encompassing art. Necessarily, then, he read quite avidly during this period. He read books on philosophy, science, and literature, including Karl Marx, Aristotle, and James Joyce. Beuys was influenced by Yves Klein, an artist with whom he had much in common, including a fascination for the secret society of the Rosicrucias, and the music and philosophy of Wagner—particularly his concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art—and the idea that art equals life.[24]

Probably the most interesting and influential post-war event in Beuys's life, and one that is surprising for those who only know him as an optimist, is a two year depression starting in 1954. The depression was largely precipitated by heartbreak. Beuys was already struggling to fight his disappointment about his failed attempts to become an artist, when his fiancée, a postal worker from Düsseldorf, sent her engagement ring back to him. He lost weight, locked himself in dark rooms for weeks, and kept saying that he wanted to disappear and needed nothing more than a backpack.[25] This went on for two years. Then, from April to August of 1957, Beuys worked on the van der Grinten farm in Kranenburg. Beuys had originally become acquainted with Hans and Joseph van der Grinten

[24] Stachelhaus 1991, 35-42.
[25] Stachelhaus 1991, 48.

through their former high school English teacher, Dr. Schönzeler, and had remained friends with them ever since. Though the boys came from a modest family background, they routinely gave Beuys a share of their allowance, for he was, until his induction into the academy, always in a state of financial woe. These farmers' sons from the Lower Rhineland were ardent art collectors and came to be successful, yet humble beneficiaries of Beuys's work. As Heiner Stachelhaus reports in his book Joseph Beuys, the boys' mother, Mrs. Van der Grinten, was the one who rescued him from his despair. From Mrs. Van der Grinten's first hand account (included in Stachelhaus's book), it is clear that Beuys had occasional spouts of productivity and talkativeness and that "he had mastered so many subjects."[26] Still though, it seemed that Beuys just wasn't getting any better. Then as he was about to leave, Mrs. Van der Grinten told him that the Lord was with him and that "once you've found your duty, all the rest will follow."[27] By invoking duty and by telling Beuys that the Lord, "put talent and art into you," she helped Beuys out of his depression. She shared her own personal suffering (she was recently widowed) and used simple, direct words to restore his shattered faith in himself. Soon after he left, Beuys made a full recovery. This time, too, was one of great artistic productivity for Beuys and his art remained a continual force in his life from then on.

[26] Stachelhaus 1991, 49.
[27] Stachelhaus 1991, 50.

For Beuys, this experience of depression in the 1950's was one of purification, one through which he became a different person. Beuys said about the experience, "this sort of crisis is a sign of either a lack of direction or of too many directions being taken at once….From then on, I began to work systematically, according to definite principles."[28] He explains that before the war and the depression he felt too much dominated by his will. Afterwards, he reflects on how his outlook changed and how his shift from being guided by will to actively surrendering saved him from ruin. He gives credit for his transformation to the van der Grinten's and to other less tangible things, demonstrating his openness to human compassion, as well as spiritual forces.[29]

In 1958, when he emerged from his spiritual crisis, Beuys's art, too, had subtly changed. Although he continued to work with themes of resurrection and rebirth, a new historical specificity began to pervade his work, giving his mythical themes a postwar German context. The cross, for example, which initially appeared in his work with purely Christian significations (Beuys was Catholic) re-emerged as a red cross in many sculptures and drawings. This change in representation linked the Christian theme of resurrection to the specific actions of the war-time

[28]Stachelhaus 1991, 53.
[29] Stachelhaus 1991, 50-53.

medical units. In addition, Beuys became much more vocal about his work and his search to develop an expanded concept of form-making.[30]

Beuys's first large-scale sculptural work after recovering from his breakdown was a 1958 entry in an international competition for a memorial at the former concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. His design consisted of a series of three "landmarks, asymmetrical quadrangles, and a reflecting bow." Though it was not chosen, Beuys created a different war memorial for the community of Büderich just a year later. His submission into the international competition in 1958 shows his interest in shaping national memory of World War II and the Holocaust.[31] With Beuys's wedding to Eva Wurmbach on September 19, 1959 and his growing financial stability and artistic acclaim, Joseph Beuys's early life of struggle and strife comes to a close. He and Eva Wurmbach had two children together, Boien Wenzel (born 1961) and Jessyka (born 1964). In 1961 he was appointed professor of monumental sculpture at the Art Academy of Düsseldorf.

During the 1970's Beuys was encouraged into performance work by friend Nam Jun Paik, a member of the flourishing "Fluxus" group. Fluxus was an international group that blended different media and disciplines. This group had huge appeal for him because of its expansive

[30] Biro, Matthew. "The Art of Joseph Beuys." The Journal of the International Institute. Ann Arbor Michigan, 20 April 2007 < http://www.umich.edu/~iinet/journal/vol2no2/biro.html>
[31] Rosenthal 2004, 156.

definition of art, which encouraged all manner of activity as art.[32] His involvement and participation in Fluxus "concerts" was important because it formed the basis for his own ritualistic, therapeutic "actions" of the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, these early performances with the Fluxus movement brought him the attention of the German media, which he also promoted and incorporated into his art-making process.[33]

However, on August 30, 1964, Beuys and fellow artist Wolf Vostell were excluded from the official Fluxus concert because their performances were deemed to be too personal and symbolic for Fluxus.[34] Beuys and Vostell then organized their own work and it is over the next few years that Beuys defined his philosophy of Social Sculpture as *Plastik*, a philosophy of art where the world itself was reconceived as a work of art. Beuys's many years of developing his theory final crystallized in these important years.

Beuys was a tireless worker and engaged in countless performances, lectures and discussions in Germany and abroad, illustrating his ideas with diagrams drawn on blackboards. Sometimes accused of being a charlatan. Beuys also had his defenders, such as Lynn MacRitchie, who argues, in her article, "On a Mission to Heal a Wounded World," that "no charlatan would have exposed himself to the marathon

[32] Rosenthal 2004, 157.
[33] Biro, Matthew. "The Art of Joseph Beuys."
[34] Stachelhaus 1991, 160.

discussions he held with all comers, no matter how hostile or obtuse. If you were sincere, you could capture his attention."[35]

Though Beuys was still to face other setbacks, such as criticism from his fellow colleagues at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf, from this point his work is marked with a sense of maturity and vision. Author, Lisa Saltzman, details in her book Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz, the extraordinary accomplishments of Beuys's lifework. She focuses, especially, on Beuys's unending commitment to help the world speak and deal with the pain, trauma, and horrors associated with the Second World War. In her book, Beuys represents an impressive first generation artist who used his unique position of primary experience and his art to effect change.

Critical Analysis of Beuys's Work

The recurrent themes of mourning and nostalgia in Beuys's work come from his metaphorically wounded condition. Beuys's interest in redemption and hope are famously said to stem from his Lazarus-like rescue when he was shot down in the Crimea and rescued by Tartars. He was said to have lain for days frozen and half dead. Though this story's veracity is questionable, its significance lays in the theme of "healing of a physical wound." The miraculous account presumably allowed Beuys to go forth as an artist in Germany and into the world to address history,

[35] MacRitche 2005.

without his wartime experience forever restricting him.[36] Given this second chance at life, Beuys, ever an idealist, wanted to change the world and thought that through art he could do it. Beuys is preoccupied with the redemptive potential through sculptures and his work acts not only as "a melancholy act of remembrance," but as a source of hope for the future.[37]

Beuys's first serious attempts to deal with physical and spiritual transformation took place in the mid-1960's. The first took place during a Fluxus performance at the Festival of New Art in the Technische Hochschule Aachen (1964) and the other, *Manresa (1966)*, at the Gallery of Alfred Schmela in Düsseldorf. In the first, fat, Beuys's signature material, served a dual purpose, suggesting Nazi medical abuse as well as healing. In *Manresa*, Beuys connected a soup-plate-crucifix to an electrical generator. The action was an allusion to the spiritual and physical regeneration of Ignatius of Loyola and signified the interconnectedness of the spiritual and technological world. He studied two of Loyola's texts, "The Spiritual Exercises" and "The Autobiography" and titled the work *Manresa* after the name of the Catalonian city in which Ignatius had his transformation. Beuys seemed to support the transformation of traditional belief systems, such as Christian impulses, into a more open and politically-engaged secular sphere. This interest in the circulation of energy between material and conceptual realms

[36] Rosenthal 2004, 10.

[37] Cork, Richard. "Matter of life and death: Visual art - Joseph Beuys packed his work with redemptive potential." New Statesman 21 February 2005 <http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-4278472/Matter-of-life-and-death.html>

continues to pervade much of Beuys's work, including works like *Auschwitz Demonstration* and *Honey Pump*.[38] Beuys's theme of transformation shows his interest in pushing limits and breaking down boundaries.

Figure 1

Manresa, 1966

Gallery of Alfred Schmela in Düsseldorf.

The Tartars are Beuys's fantasy of an imaginary race from Eurasia and represent his own feelings of dividedness.[39] Beuys personally made himself the displaced survivor of the land called Eurasia because he felt alienated from the West and at pains to return to his imaginary utopia (Eurasia). Many, especially those concentrated in Berlin, experienced similar feelings of dividedness as Germany's capitol was separated into East and West and as Germany's past became so negatively charged. Beuys's fearless exploration of memory and overt representations of mourning and nostalgia served as a signal to the art world of the many existing diaspora and to later artists about the importance of art as the voice for those who had suffered, perished in, or survived the horrors of

[38] Biro, Matthew. "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust." 122.
[39] Rosenthal 2004, 10.

World War II.[40] Embracing the visual and shying from abstraction, which he thought absent of life, Beuys employed means to deal with the horrors of World War II. Though divided, he did not let his inner turmoil lead to isolation. He was not an obedient subscriber to Adorno's call for silence, but instead urged dialogue and an active facing of one's past, through the present. Unlike many artists, he believed representational art was an acceptable form of expression.

Dialogue is an integral part of Beuys's social sculpture. Beuys is an innovator and important figure in the European art world for he expanded the definition of 'material' to include will, speech, and thought. With his expanded conception of art, he developed his *Parallelprozess* or parallel process, which referred to the connection between his object-based work and actions and his discussion-process works.[41] This is to say that his discussion-process works, such as *Should We Not Finally Make a Democratic Democracy through Referendum [Free People's initiative, Inc.],* were just as relevant and artistic as his object-based works and actions: *The Pack, Show Your Wound, And In Us…Beneath Us…Land Under,* and *Economic Value*.[42] Beuys's believed that action is in the "making of the artwork," and is hence the most important stage, and the object is simply the "imprint."[43] This belief was reflected in his

[40] Rosenthal 2004, 100.
[41] Sacks 2004, x.
[42] Rosenthal 2004, 170.
[43] Harlan 2004, 1-2.

installations, performances, photographs, and emphasized in many of his interviews.

A prime example of Beuys's *parallelprozess* is *Honigpumpe* or *Honey Pump at the Workplace* (1977), the documentation of a six-hour long action. *Honey Pump* took place in Beuys*'s* Düsseldorf studio in the Free International University (FIU). The documentation consists of a silkscreen print, fifteen photographs, an audiocassette, a booklet, fat, felt, a rabbit figure, and honey.[44]

Figure 2

Honey Pump in the Workplace, Documenta 6, 1977

The Fridericianum, Kassel

In a 1997 discussion with Beuys, entitled "What is Art?," with former Christian Community priest, lecturer, and personal friend of Beuys, Volker Harlan, Beuys explains his theory on art and materiality. Discussing Beuys's documenta, *Honey Pump at the Workplace*, Volker Harlan questions whether he even needed to see the honey pump

[44] "Joseph Beuys: Schwerpunkte der Sammlung 2." Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien. Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, 31 January 2007 <http://www.mumok.at/index.php?version=2&cid=535>.

documenta or if the idea of the "honey pump" was already understood in precise detail. Beuys answers that the honey pump documenta is "effective, even as an idea."[45] He elucidates his answer saying how the idea of the honey pump had been developing for a long time before he began making it and that the documenta was used as merely a symbol. It functioned as an experience for the people of the core idea "implicit in the honey pump directly…by communicating their ideas there for a hundred days, …making connections."[46] The actual work is incomplete, standing on its own simply as a machine or a sculpture. The people and their interactions with the sculpture are integral to the art. Thus, his *parallelprozess* involves always the idea and concept and uses the object or physical manifestation of the idea to provoke conversation and discussion. The object is not always needed, the "art" can exist in the principle itself, but can also function as a symbol, like the honey pump at the Free International University, when put into physical form. Beuys was most excited about the live interaction with his work, which signified, for him, the process of circulation and renewal.

Beuys's outspokenness and commitment to dialogue is epitomized in his famous declaration and title of one of his works, *The Silence of Marcel Duchamp is Overrated.* He had no intention of being silent about his subject, which was the world. Beuys was going to open up discussion, much of which explored the role of art and posited human creativity as the

[45] Harlan 2004, 44-45.
[46] Harlan 2004, 46.

force for positive social change.[47] Through his art and person, Beuys desired to inspire new insights, to inform his audience, and transform the world. In a world full of death, destruction, and despair his own personal story of redemption and his faith in art propelled his trust in the German ability to overcome the pain and memory of Holocaust. Even more broadly, he aimed at giving Germans and non-Germans alike a sense of empowerment. Beuys felt that art was an understandable and egalitarian way to accomplish this.[48]

Beuys's *Parallelprozess* operated to retain the force and the form of the principle, while diluting all physical constituents, in an effort to shake away, transform, and dematerialize the world. [49] The emphasis then is in the cognitive and less on the physical. Paradoxically, this is achieved through the use of very tactile materials. Beuys explained the role of this artistic process in relation to history saying:

> So it's also important that what has been lost is retrieved again through use, or by simply perceiving it, for we cannot cut ourselves off from our human past, we can't forget our entire history and always start from zero again, but rather we really have to be aware of humanity's whole history, as process of development, as evolution.[50]

Beuys believed that the cognitive process was the starting point for structuring a harmonious relationship between a work of art and the world and its inhabitants[51] Beuys makes a claim for the saliency of

[47] MacRitche 2005
[48] MacRitche 2005
[49] Harlan 2004, 53.
[50] Harlan 2004, 52.
[51] Harlan 2004, 96.

remembrance and also exhibits a very forward and positive approach to looking at history. This very clearly contrasts Adorno's 1949 call for silence and his belief that the Holocaust should not be represented. Beuys here, too, shows the remarkable sense of forgiveness that Derrida talked about in Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness. Beuys is willing to forgive the unthinkable, the horrors of the Holocaust, because he sees the value in forgiveness and has a belief in restorative justice. He sees our knowledge of history as important to the notion of progress. Beuys also mentions the importance of retrieving "through use" that which was lost in history. Beuys's use of art and his interesting choice of materials can be seen as one of the "uses."

Beuys was a nontraditional sculptor, unconventional in his use of eccentric substances with newly conceived aesthetic effects. Though Beuys's choice of materials was more cerebral than aesthetic, he approached his materials with a dual purpose in mind.[52] The aesthetic or material component, however, is not insignificant to Beuys. Rather, Beuys was less concerned with beauty and aesthetics because he saw them as a means of escaping from the issues and obligations of the German past and present. Instead, his goal aimed at heightening the viewer's awareness of everyday objects and realities, including the bad, ugly, and strange. This is significant for it shows Beuys's opening up of artistic convention and his refusal to deny the past. In fact, he makes use of organic, unaesthetic

[52] Rosenthal 2004, 99.

materials, such as fat, felt, and tallow and was very much grounded in the physical.[53]

In addition to the aesthetic, he considered the mythic and symbolic implications held by each material. [54] Due to the inherent association and meaning that his unusual materials would provoke, Beuys's sculpture embodied content rather than symbolized it. Beuys encouraged viewer self-reflection in regard to his works, but still used materials that might convey, by their very essence, a particular content.[55] This was an important development in the art world and significant in the art-going world, for it still allowed a substantial amount of personal meaning for each viewer. Beuys's art became a visceral site open to anyone; his symbolism a guide, but not a key.

Beuys's association of fat with warmth, flexibility, and development prove it to be a very popular material in much of his artwork. Fat was a very real and personal representation to Beuys of warmth; for animal fat was used by the Tartars to salve his injuries after his crash in the Crimea during WWII.[56] Additionally, fat's great flexibility expressed Beuys's views on the fundamental nature of sculpture; elasticity. With fat, one need only touch it and it was reshaped by warmth alone. Fat is in line with Beuys's evolving Theory of Sculpture that sought to expand

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[53] Rosenthal 2004, 25.
54 Masters, Greg. "Joseph Beuys: Past the Affable." Ed. Thorsten Scheerer and Klaus Dieter Schönfeldt. 9 January 1999 <http://athena.formstreng.net/ep/ep992.html>
[55] Rosenthal 2004, 102.
[56] Harlan 2004, 47.

sculpture's expression. Beuys wanted his sculptures to be referred to as "Plastik," espousing his belief that sculpture was dexterous and multi-purposeful.[57] "Plastik" referred to a sculpture that was not fixed or finished, and allowed Beuys to interact with his material or object in any way.

Harlan Volker, a close colleague of Beuys, claims that Beuys used fat, too, because it develops rather than just exists. A prime example is the process by which fat develops in plants. The process has four stages with the development of fat in the fourth. In the beginning stage, plant growth dies back as the seeds form. Then, fat encapsulates the germ, the tiny droplets of fat free themselves from the old plant, and lastly the fat falls to the earth, (possibly) to start a new process. [58] Only when the plant can progress no further does it die. Mark Rosenthal, distinguished art curator, testifies to Beuys's association of fat with development saying, fat "epitomizes a warm, inchoate substance from which new structures might be created."[59]

Fat is interpreted as symbolizing development, which closely echoes the themes of redemption and rebirth in Beuys's work. Like fat, redemption and new life is seen in the story of Lazarus from The Bible. The story of Lazarus foretold Christ's mission of self-sacrifice and his dying on the cross. Christ says in John 12:24, "Verily, verily, I say unto

[57] Rosenthal 2004, 24.
[58] Harlan 2004, 91.
[59] Rosenthal 2004, 25.

you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."[60] Beuys's was a believer in the restorative power of fat to give new life. He claimed that fat, literally, restored his life when his plane crashed in the Crimea. If the story isn't true, as most scholars believe it isn't, then fat becomes the embodiment of the postwar ability to achieve redemption and get a second chance at life after so much death.

The following two works, *The Pack* and *Show Your Wound*, include fat as a key leitmotif, but vary in meaning. In *The Pack*, fat is used for its material qualities of warmth, flexibility, and development to suggest its redemptive properties, while in *Show Your Wound* fat is used to revive the horrors of the Holocaust.

Figure 3
The Pack (Das Rudel), 1969
Staatliche Museen Kassel

[60] John 12:24

Figure 3
Show Your Wound (Zeige deine Wunde), 1974-75
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus

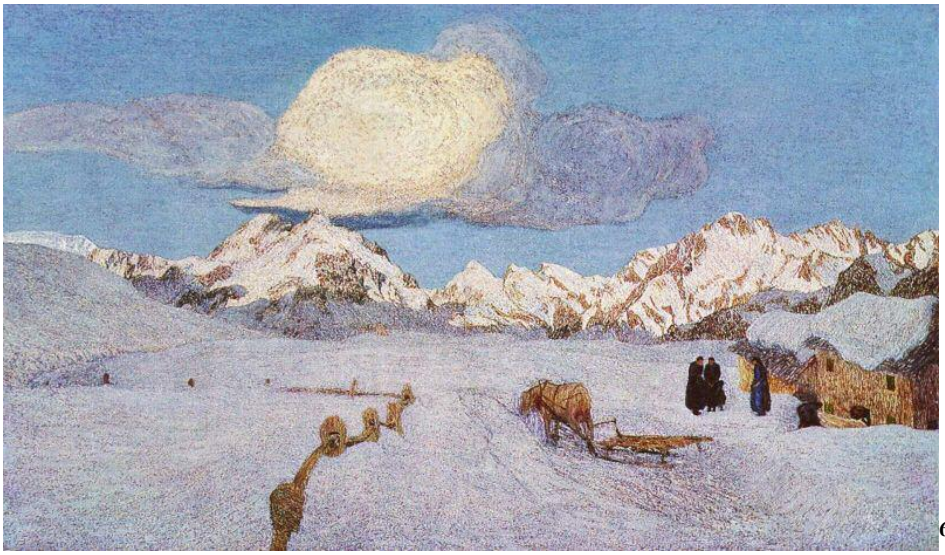
The use of fat in Beuys's 1969 work, *The Pack*, demonstrates his concept of "filled sculpture," which utilizes things "rare in art, common in life."[61] Beuys himself stated that it "signified primitive means…taken to insure survival."[62] *The Pack* consisted of a Volkswagen minibus with thirty-two little sleds pouring out the rear doors, each equipped with a "survival kit." The survival kit contained a role of felt, a lump of fat, and a flashlight. Commonly thought to be a reference to his (possible) mythical rescue by the Tartars, it also is an allusion to works by an Italian artist much admired by Beuys, Giovanni Sergantini. Calling on Sergantini's *Ritorno al Bosco* (*Return from the Woods*, 1890) and his last panel of a triptych entitled *Armonia della Vita-La natura-Armonoia della Morte*,

[61] Rosenthal 2004, 92.
[62] Rosenthal 2004, 75.

(*Life-Nature-Death*) the sleds come to be seen as representations, and more specifically, vehicles of death.[63] An understanding of Beuys's own rendering of the leitmotif of death is important to understanding his use of fat as redemptive.

Figure 5

Giovanni Segantini
La Morte,1898-1899
Segantini-Museum



[64]

Beuys always portrayed death by positioning objects or forms horizontally on the ground, implying corpses. He says that they sight of dead persons lying around everywhere in Russia impacted him profoundly and "triggered his decision to become an artist."[65] For this reason, Beuys linked sleep, silence, and cold to death. The very linear, rigid, horizontal

[63] Rosenthal 2004, 75.
[64] Note that this is not the painting mentioned in the paragraph above. It does, however, still show the Sergantini's use of the sled in works about death. La Morte means death.
[65] Rosenthal 2004, 80.

structure of the sleds brings, then, this association with death and dying. Positioning fat atop these sleds offers an interesting juxtaposition, showing the proximity and close interplay between life and death. The fat and sled, life and death, seem to have a symbiotic relationship, with each one's presence defining the other. Beuys thought that in order to be alert in life, death had to be ever-present in his consciousness. Ever hopeful, Beuys uses this strange relationship to show that death was just one more situation in which to find the possibility of transformation. The fat atop the sleds, in combination with the sleds ability for movement, embodies this possibility.

Fat is used in Beuys's controversial installation, *Show Your Wound*, as a means of exposing and challenging taboos established in postwar Germany. *Show Your Wound* was exhibited in 1980 in the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus after much debate. *Show Your Wound* is a death piece, a memento mori. The work is an "environment" and consists primarily of five double objects. The first three sets are: two implements against a two-part, white-painted wooden board on the wall, two blackboards chalked with "Show Your Wound," two dissection tables containing two lamps, two galvanized iron boxes covered with glass and containing fat, two zinc boxes containing fat, two test tubes, two bird skulls, two clinical thermometers and two preserving jars with gauze filters two pitchforks. The work includes as well, two wooden-handled iron forks located on a slate tablet and two issues of the Italian left-wing

paper, *La Lotta Continua,* mounted in white wooden boxes and addressed to Joseph Beuys.[66] The mortuary tables and fat bring into consciousness what is supposed to be taboo, for they evoke memories of repulsive atrocities committed, in the name of medical research by fascist doctors during the Holocaust.[67]

The German people's reactions to part of the "environment," such as the fat, just reaffirmed the director of the Gallery's opinion that the piece is about repression and taboos. and after charged cries of "degenerate" were thrown around. Degenerate or "entartet" was a term adopted by the Nazi regime in regard to all modern art in the 1930's. Accordingly, in the 1930's artists like Ernst Kirchner, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix all had their work confiscated and destroyed.

Show Your Wound uses doubles to contrast abstraction and representation, a technique which goes straight to the heart of Adorno's debate. Distinguished American art curator, Mark Rosenthal, talks of how the environment's abstraction and "recalls the period of 'inner exile' for German artists just after the war, when abstraction was literally a kind of escape and a denial of history."[68] Beuys did not care particularly for abstraction, but uses the black monochromes (canvases painted black) on the wall to highlight the horrific situation within the room. One of Beuys's most popular critics, Caroline Tisdall, suggests that *Show Your Wound*

[66] Stachelhaus 1991, 161.
[67] Cork 2005.
[68] Rosenthal 2004, 74.

dates back to "Beuys's Auschwitz monument and shamanistic drawings of the 1950's" but also looks forward as well. The grim colors and sterile white walls are terrifying as one thinks of the doctors who were concerned not with healing, but with inflicting pain. The monochrome paintings and the newspapers are the most obvious representations of the competing art styles of abstraction and representation. The monochrome paintings represent abstraction and the newspapers direct representation. The fact that art holds the central upper space in the room, "as if art itself is transcendent"[69] challenges Adorno's original 1949 dictum that implied abstraction in art was the only feasible way to attempt to address the horrors of the Holocaust. Beuys was very much against abstraction, believing it to be a kind of escapism. As one of Beuys's good friends and colleague explained of Beuys's approach and aim, "When you put your finger on the sore point-on the wound-you clarify a problem; you get to the heart of the matter."[70] Beuys preferred to work in symbols and use everyday types of objects as his primary media. The news event on the blackboards are the source for the title, the newspapers urging German viewers to "Zeige deine Wunde" or "Show Your Wound."[71]

The vitrine, another favorite art form of Beuys's, was a format which encouraged the viewer to ask questioning and dialogue, for with a vitrine objects are very carefully displayed and arranged. In a vitrine the viewer is encouraged to wonder about the arrangement. The *Auschwitz*

[69] Rosenthal 2004, 74.
[70] Stachelhaus 1991, 162.
[71] Rosenthal 2004, 74.

Demonstration is an exhibit consisting of vitrines or "glass-paneled cabinets or cases for displaying articles," assembled by Beuys in 1968, that reconceptualizes what it means to be "German" both individually and collectively. The *Auschwitz Demonstration* is a collection of objects dating from 1956 to 1964, including a cast metal relief image of a fish, a faceless clay figure of the crucified Christ, a desiccated rat on a bed of dried grass, a drawing of a starved girls with a sled, a folding photographic map of Auschwitz ripped from a book or a brochure, rings of blood sausages with plus or minus signs painted on either end, sun-lamp goggles, two rectangular blocks of wax on top of a double-burner electric hot plate, and so on.

Figure 6

Beuys's Block, 1968

Figure 7

Auschwitz Demonstration, 1968

This vitrine is a prime example of a hermeneutically undecidable experience for it resists the viewer's attempt to draw an overarching interpretation. "Hermeneutic undecidability" is the ability of a cultural representation to generate a mix of interpretations, not just ambivalence, creating radically contradictory readings of the same set of signifiers. The brutality of the Holocaust seems to be suggested by the photograph of Auschwitz, the mummified rat, the vials of fat, and the links of sausages. The goggles, measuring stick, and burner could offer evidence to link the

Nazi state and industrial technology to one another, suggesting that the magnitude of the Nazi horror be somewhat accounted for by the industrial means that allowed executioners and "ordinary" Germans to be distanced from their task. In addition, the grouping of the Jewish victims with the more disgusting and base objects could suggest the Nazi's anti-Semitic propaganda. The plethora of possibilities points to an ambiguity about the artist's intention, which intentionally or not, provides the spectator an arena in which to think about the relationships between the different objects and to rethink the interrelations between these supposedly different "spheres" of human action. The character of the work, however, in its simplicity encourages spectators to interpret the work and/or feel a part of it.

Auschwitz Demonstration is reflexive too, as Matthew Bino points out in his article "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust" for it is made up of smaller parts, meant to be taken as one piece of a larger work called "Beuys Block", a seven room exhibition which deals with Beuys's identity as a post-war German artist.[72] Reflexive, as defined here, means a self-awareness by which the viewer is engaged with the artist's representation and its relationship to the environments and life contests to which it refers and through which it passes. It is important to understand the placement of this vitrine; it corporeally stages the question of identity.

[72] Biro, Matthew. "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust." 119-122.

Beuys's Block (1968) consists of seven rooms, with *Auschwitz Demonstration* situated near center and as the most claustrophobic part of the exhibit. After passing through the *Auschwitz Demonstration* the viewer finds him or herself in very tight quarters and begins to become aware of his or her power to disturb or damage the art. In this way, the vitrine promotes historical reflection on German identity in relation to the Holocaust as largely a mixture of undecidable interpretations.[73] Yet any interpretation inflicts some sort of damage through accusation.

Beuys was a prominent figure in West Germany's oppositional scene, and shared the Left's investment in the notion of a socialist alternative. In Beuys's environment *Economic Values,* which consists of iron shelves with basic food and tools from the GDR, the selection of poor items for objects serves as examples of "die Reste," or remains, that many saw as integral to East Germany during the cold war. DDR stood for many, not as Deutsche Demokratische Republik, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), but rather *der dumme Rest*, the meager remainder of Germany's division.[74] *Economic Values* is about the spoils of state socialism—the idealized Marxist alternative that many, Beuys included, had imagined to exist in the East. Fixating on loss, Beuys betrays the Wester Left's "romantic investment" in the GDR as an impediment to

[73] Biro, Matthew. "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust." 124.
[74] literally: the dumb residue or remainder

"moving on." Scribner claims that *Economic Values* "remains a sullen stockroom, bereft of a compelling historical narrative."[75]

Figure 8 and Figure 9

Economic Values (Wirtschaftswerte), 1980

Beuys never wanted to remain silent. He exposed in *Show Your Wound* and other works the very taboos that were repressing and hindering German society from moving on in the world. Theodor Adorno later clarified his original dictum from 1949, saying that perhaps he was wrong to say that after Auschwitz one could no longer write poems. He wrote in *Negative Dialectics*, "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream," thus recognizing that to remain silent was to perpetuate the silence in which Auschwitz was masked.[76] This later clarification by Adorno about his 1949 dictum is one that Beuys discovered on his own. Beuys's brave championing of Holocaust themes

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[75] Scribner, Charity. "Object, Relic, Fetish, Thing: Joseph Beuys and the Museum." Critical Inquiry volume 29. University of Chicago: 2003, 634–649.

[76] Adorno, Theodore. Negative Dialectics (1966), Trans. E. B. Ashton, (New York: Seabury Press, 1973) 6.

paved the way for many later artists including Anselm Kiefer, Gerhard Richter, and Sigmar Polke to do the same. Beuys is still the most sought after German artist in any bookstore.

Connection to Kara Walker

Joseph Beuys was an artist and person committed to breaking down both institutional and personal barriers. As evidenced by his work with the founding of the Green Party and his support of German student activists in the 1970's, Beuys was not afraid to get involved in politics. His commitment to justice even led Beuys out of Germany and to the United States in the 1970's to protest the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. His main form of protest came through an installation that he did in 1974 entitled, *I Like America, America Likes Me*, a title full or irony and criticism and pertaining to the U.S's brutal treatment of its Native American population. The performance *I Iike America, America Likes Me* involved a live coyote, staff, cloak, and fifty copies of *The Wall Street Journal*. On the most literal level, the work was a critique of the United States's condescending treatment of other countries, especially of their attitude to the Germans after World War II. Beuys's work protested their arrogance, absent of the humility that should accompany a country that committed such atrocities against its indigenous peoples, the Native Americans. Beuys sought to demonstrate to Americans and the world through his wrestling with the coyote and his refusal to touch American

soil, just how tainted and pretentious he thought the United States was. Though his action didn't galvanize the government to action, the spirit of the action did take root in the art world.

Figure 10

I Like America and America Likes Me (1974)

Kara Walker, a young, contemporary African American woman, is an upcoming artist who, like Beuys, is interested with the historical narrative. She is famous for her large silhouettes, which explore the intersection of race, sex, violence and one's relationship to the past. Kara Walker is an important artist to look at today, especially in regard to Joseph Beuys, for she is doing many very similar things with the treatment of memory and the past as Beuys did in the 1960's and 1970's. Though Walker at first glance appears to be entirely different than Beuys, in actuality they share similar thoughts on history, the role of the artist, and

memory. This next section I will give a brief account of Kara Walker's background and then continue on with an analysis on Walker and Beuys on the topics of: personal versus public involvement, belief in change through art, shock as a tactic, history and the generational divide, identity and a look at what is inherited, the role of the artist, and lastly their treatment of memory.

II. Kara Walker's Biography

It is helpful to know a little bit about Kara Walker's background because she uses her own life and experiences as material, as well as calling on myth, media, and literature. In an interview done through the Museum of Modern Art, Walker talks about the issues in her work as ones that "translate into [the] very personal: Who am I beyond this skin I'm in?" She describes a process, starting in the mid-1990's by where she keeps a notebook of words, ideas, and images. Walker says it contained "just about anything that I could to process what blackness was and is all about for me--very personal writings, along with just clippings." She describes this artistic process as one of her ways "of getting at ideas."[77] Her biography is important because her art, which draws from life and history, begs its viewers to look at their own lives, experiences, and construction of identity.

Early Life

Kara Walker was born 1969 in Stockton, California. She was inspired to become an artist by her dad, a now retired educated artist, professor, and an administrator. Her mother worked as an administrative assistant throughout her life and is responsible, according to Walker, for the dark sarcasm and odd humor that clearly pervades much of Walker's

[77] "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." MoMA.org. 10 April 2007 <http://www.moma.org/onlineprojects/conversations/trans_kwalker.html>.

work.[78] She wanted to be an artist when she was three primarily because her father is also an artist. He gave her the desire to imagine, which she says never came easily to her. It ultimately manifested itself in a fantasy about time travel.[79] The first work of art that really mattered to her was a work by Christian Schad, a German painter of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* or New Objectivity school. Schad's A*gosta, the Winged Man and Rasha, the Black Dove* (1929) was included in a show of 20th-century German art at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta around 1987, and it is a slightly surreal portrait of a deformed white man and a beautiful black woman as lovers. Kara Walker was affected by both the subject matter and magnitude of the actual work.[80]

Figure 11

Christian Schad
Agosta, the Winged Man, and Rasha, the Black Dove, 1929

[78] "Answers and a little bit of wine," Kara Walker, ed. Grigoteit, Dr. Ariane and Friedhelm Hütte, (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsch Bank AG, 2002) 5-6.
[79] "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." MoMA.org.
[80] "Questionnaire: Kara Walker." Frieze.com. 25 February 2007 <http://www.frieze.com/column_single.asp?c=307>.

Move to Georgia

When Walker's family moved from California to Georgia in her early teens, she became much more aware of "blackness." She recounts her journey to new awareness saying, "When I was coming along in Georgia, I became black in more senses than just the kind of multicultural acceptance that I grew up with in California. Blackness became a very loaded subject, a very loaded thing to be—all about forbidden passions and desires, and all about a history that's still living, very present."[81] Walker calls it a loaded subject and talks of how she became very submissive and subservient to myths about blackness—that it's exotic, animalistic, savage or noble, strong, forceful, or that it deserves to be on display. It was in Georgia that she started keeping a notebook of ideas. She tells James Hannaham in an interview in 1998 entitled "Pea, Ball, Bounce," of writing in her notebook despite anticipated contradictions.[82] In this same interview she recounts an incident that occurred while she was in high school in Atlanta. When she and her then white boyfriend approached his car there was a flyer from the Ku Klux Klan warning against the evils of black women and propagating stereotypes of disease and moral degradation. This was a wake-up call for still naïve Kara

[81] MacAdam, Barbara. "Kara Walker's Contradictions." Columbia Magazine. Fall 2003. 15 April 2007 <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/alumni/Magazine/Fall2003/walker.html>.
[82] "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." MoMA.org.

Walker, which drove her to examine how these types of issues had been represented in art. It was not until a little bit later, in her senior year at the Atlanta College of Art, where she got her B.A in 1991, that she started to work these issues out in her art.[83]

Kara Walker's work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions in the United States and abroad. Walker's work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. She is a 1997 recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award, and was the United States representative to the 2002 São Paolo Bienal in Brazil.[84]

Kara Walker is married to German jewelry designer, Klaus Burgel, and they have one child, Octavia. Kara Walker is currently a professor at Columbia University in New York City where and she and her family reside.

Critical Analysis of Walker's Work

Controversial African American artist, Kara Walker, started exhibiting her wall installations in prominent museums in 1994. Her use of silhouettes marks her unique style and represents her concern with the

[83] Hannaham, James. "Pea, Ball, Bounce." HighBeam Encyclopedia. 11 January 1998: Brant Publications. 25 February 2007
< http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-21248654.html>.
[84] "Kara Walker: Biography." Art: 21. 2 April 2007.
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/index.html>.

historical process, drawing both on the tradition of Shadow Theater and from the Western genre of silhouetted profile portraits popular in the nineteenth century.[85] Her art is dark, violent, sexually explicit, and irreverent. It is disturbing. She reworks various popular cultural forms and images, trying to create a countermythology to the racial, class, and gender-based romanticizations of American slavery.[86]

Walker's work consists of life-size silhouettes cut from black paper and affixed to white walls. At first glance the cutouts have a formal appearance, stemming largely from the way they remind viewers of the Victorian portrait techniques, but on a more detailed look, one sees something much more disturbing and provocative. Set in the American South before the Civil War, Walker's compositions depict men, women, and children, both black and white, engaged in various unseemly activities, including forbidden, fetishized sex play, women with musical instruments and animals inserted into them, defecation, and floating children. In her work, Walker portrays life on the plantation, where masters, mistresses, slave men, women, and children enact a subverted version of the past. It's as if the figures have their own will. The relationships between the figures are often obscure, with either lots of white space separating them or, at the other extreme, figures bunched

[85] Richards 2003, 55.
[86] Gordon, Avery F. Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People. (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2004) 160-162.

together. Though her works are mostly dramas told in sets of series of silhouettes, it is often photographed and displayed as a single image.

A good example of her silhouettes, and one specifically focusing on the process of historical narrative, is the group portrait silhouette of four females in her large mural piece, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven.*[87] The scene which is one of many clusters of silhouettes in the larger tableau, shows three matured women standing staggered in an effort to suckle off one another. The farthest figure stands erect as a woman to her right, with arms folded behind holding a basket, leans over to suckle from her. From this second basket-holding figure suckles a third, slightly smaller female, also with an exposed chest, from which a small child tries to suckle, extending its small arms toward the nipple. Confusing and troubling intergenerational relationships are of central concern in this vignetted and in Walker's art in general. A second important theme is quite literally, racial profiling. From the clothes, lips, and facial profile one concludes that the figures are black. Why, exactly, this seems to be a forgone conclusion is one of the things that interests Walker.

Figure 2

The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven), 1995

For Kara Walker, identity and history are inexorably linked and complicated by issues of race. Kara Walker uses the female body and images of suckling to explore the concept of generational change and to dispel the myth of progress. Making a metaphoric link between suckling and the need for continuity over time, Kara Walker acknowledges the double-edged sword of history as both a source of life and heritage, as well as an obstacle on which a false notion of progress is predicated. Walker presents this obsessive love for history as like that of one's complex relationship for his or her progenitors, and examines the role of creation, as an artist making art, a woman creating life, and a person telling her history. In all of Walker's representations, history is very personal and also very complicated, very private and then quite public.

Walker's silhouettes are positioned deliberately so as to create narratives, that move from a critical analysis of the history of slavery to a new examination of contemporary racial and gender stereotypes. As a result, her shows tend to cause a furor among viewers and within the African-American community. Older, better-known African-American artists like Betye Saar have attacked Walker for portraying racial

stereotypes rather than aggressively attacking them; some even called for a boycott.[88]

[88] MacAdam, Barbara. "Kara Walker's Contradictions." 2007.

III. Joseph Beuys and Kara Walker

Which of us has overcome his past? And the past of a Negro is blood dripping down through the leaves, gouged out eyeballs, the sex torn from the socket and severed with a knife. But this past is not special to the Negro. The horror is also the past, and the everlasting potential, or temptation, of the human race. If we do not know this, it seems to me, we know nothing about ourselves, nothing about each other; to have accepted this is also to have found a source of strength – a source of all our power. But one must first accept this paradox, with joy. - James Baldwin[89]

In this chapter, I will outline how Kara Walker and Joseph Beuys's art, style, and philosophy compare in attempting to explore questions of ethnic, racial and cultural identity.

Personal Experience and Public Art

Due to personal circumstances and experiences, both Kara Walker and Joseph Beuys's work is very personally motivated and involved. Kara Walker feels very directly and unequivocally the effects of the African American struggle to achieve equal rights in the United States.

Kara Walker is very conscious of her personal heritage and historical past. She deliberately connects her personal experience of race to African-American history. Part of this is due to the fact that she is an avid reader of all types of literature, as evidenced by her many references in interviews to works or novels, many showing literature's depiction and

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89 Walker, Hamza. "Kara Walker: January 12- February 23, 1997." The Renaissance Society. 6 April 2007 <*http://www.renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Essay.51.0.0.0.0.html*>.

representation of African American people. In her art, she deliberately connects personal issues to broader cultural, historical, artistic and literary traditions. For example, her 1995 installation *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* refers to Harriet Beecher Stowe's best selling novel of the 19th century, Uncle Tom's Cabin, picking up on themes of master-slave and abuse. In *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* Kara Walker introduces the *Negress,* the black silhouette woman often called her alter ego, as the silhouette heroine in her work.[90]

Kara Walker's personal fascination with the intersection of race, sex, and violence stemmed from her own ethnic background, her gender, her experience in a bi-racial relationship, and her artistic interest in the construction of stereotypes and identities. She is an African American woman and intellectual living in the United States and married to a white German. Her work is important because it crosses the boundary between public and private, a boundary which too often serves as a screen in keeping larger questions secret. Author Avery F. Gordon makes the claim in his book, Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People, that this "cloaking" is one of the major legacies of racial slavery that remains today.[91]

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[90] Dixon, Annette. Robert Fr. Reid-Pharr, and Thelma Golden. Pictures From Another Time. ed. Annette Dixon. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002) 14.
[91] Gordon 2004, 162.

Though Beuys, too, felt a very personal connection with his past, due to his employment in the German *Luftwaffe* in World War II, his position varies from Kara Walker's in that his viewpoint comes from the side of the "aggressor" and also from a point less focused on exploring racial stereotypes in-depth. Unlike Beuys, Kara Walker speaks from the position of the "wronged people" and in addition focuses on the role of gender and sexuality in racial tensions. And whereas Beuys actually lived in the time period (World War II) that is often represented in his work and is trying to move forward, Walker seems to be doing the opposite. Though grounded in the present, and clearly born after the ante-bellum Civil War period, Walker is obsessed with this past and uses it as a tool to understand the representations and stereotypes that chain the black and white communities to history even today. Though she experiences the products of that historical racism, her personal connection to the history is a bit more tenuous.[92] Both Beuys and Walker, however, have focused on the subjugation of one group by another based on perceived differences, showed the oppressor-oppressed dynamic to be ongoing and reinforced by silence and apathy, and then have attempted to use art to liberate people's minds from the vicious cycle of trauma and abuse caused to the human psyche and whole societies by large wrongs of the past.

Walker, like Beuys, calls upon her personal experiences as a way to reach the greater masses through her art. For example, Walker will

[92] Hannaham 1998.

sometimes speak of the stigma associated with interracial relations. She shows how works like Harriet Jacob's autobiographical novel Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1862*)* are problematic in that they play into fantasies of interracial debauchery without realizing it.[93] She explained to author Annette Dixon in an interview, "how walking with somebody white in the street would automatically trigger a response that was one hundred fifty years old,"—no doubt an occurrence that happens frequently because of her marriage to a white German man.[94] Kara Walker wants to dispel this loaded response, experienced herself on a personal level, and to discuss it with a wider audience. Walker broadens the scope of representation to include the subjective and psychological implications of slavery. She examines American history through the lens of race and sexuality, exploring the dialectics of pyscho-sexual pleasure/pain, and desire/disgust. As scholars of her work will say, enlightenment by Walker comes through discomfort only.[95] Thus, her public artwork is never entirely separated from her personal experience and goals. Walker's life and art become entwined.[96]

Beuys's move for serious change took on a national agenda, as he came to recognize the need for communal healing and acknowledgement of incidents, such as the Holocaust. The same can be said of Walker, who

[93] Jacobs, Harriet. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. ed. L. Maria Child. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).
[94] Armstrong, Liz. "Kara Walker." No Place Like Home. ed. Kathleen Mclean. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997) 104.
[95] Walker, Hamza. "Kara Walker: January 12- February 23, 1997."
[96] Dixon, Annette. Robert Fr. Reid-Pharr, and Thelma Golden 2002, 32.

uses coffee in her work as a commentary on the coloring of blacks by whites. Beuys used unusual, yet commonplace materials such as fat and felt, which stemmed from his very life changing experience with the Tartars that was mentioned earlier in his biography. Beuys has both a personal and artistic connection to the materials.

Beuys's experience of war and its effects was instrumental in leading him to become an artist. The near death experience in the Crimea and rescue by the Tartars influenced the highly mystical and spiritual element into his work. Beuys modeled his life on the figure of Jesus, and embraced the redemptive possibilities of both art and myth. Beuys's art, beginning with his personal experiences while at war, gradually expanded to reach national and global significance as he expanded his definition of art to include the world. Beuys would focus his attention on dialogue, both on the local and political level and Walker on unveiling continued racial profiling and undercutting stereotypes.

Change through Art

Kara Walker and Joseph Beuys are very conscious of their roles as artists and their influence in the world. Both are very interested in questions of memory, history, identity, and inherited guilt. Similar, too, is their notion of themselves as creators and guides toward a new understanding of the past, which in turn affects how all of us deal with

history and live in the present. For this reason, both are concerned with questions of the temporal and also of creation.

Both Walker and Beuys see mysticism as important to their art. Beuys here reigns supreme, however, in his knowledge and use of mysticism. Beuys sees himself less as an original creator, but as a savior or Christ-like figure of redemption. He saw himself as the one to bring redemption and salvation to Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War. Interestingly, when Kara Walker was asked, "What do you wish you knew?" by an interviewer for The Frieze, Europe's leading magazine of contemporary art and culture, she answered that she would like to study comparative mythology and catch up on world literature. Walker's interest in mysticism and myth suggests similar interests to Beuys, as well as a similar approach to life and the world. One can see Beuys's interest in spiritual and physical transformation in his works *Manresa*, *Auschwitz Demonstration.* Walker, too, borrows from imagery and material from myths.[97] Frankenstein and "Leda and the Swan" are two examples of mythic material that Walker uses in Emancipation Approximation.

Both the artist and woman are creators; one of life, the other of art. In Walker's talk about her project, "The Melodrama of 'Gone with the Wind,'" she explains its theme to be largely "about trying to examine what

[97] "Questionnaire: Kara Walker." Frieze.com. 2007.

it is to be an African American woman artist…It's about how do you make representations of your world, given what you've been given?"[98] For Walker, artistic creativity is a talent inherited from her father and one that she recognizes and embraces.[99] This positive and advantageous inheritance, however, is not the only thing that Walker received from her family and from her personal history. She also talks about having, as a black woman artist, "the perspective of a person who has been presented with a pre-dissected body to work from. A pre-dissected body of information."[100] She views history in very visceral terms to show that all that is left of it are bits and pieces of a whole body of information. In her work, she alludes to Frankenstein as a metaphor for her artistic project, and reemphasizes the power of creation. The novel Frankenstein was written by Mary Shelley, a woman, in which the main character, Doctor Frankenstein, creates a male creature by mixing human parts. For Frankenstein's creature, this mixing resulted in a complex and difficult identity, with perceived strengths (such as great height) turning into ways of profiling the creature as a monster and categorizing it as an ultimate 'other.' The decapitation and reconfiguring of bodies in Walker's work, *The Emancipation Approximation*, is reminiscent of Dr. Frankenstein's formation of his creature and provokes its viewers to recognize the ways in which they racially profile.

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[98] "The Melodrama of 'Gone With the Wind.'" Art: 21. December 1, 2006. <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/clip1.html>

[99] "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." MoMA.org.

[100] "Projection fictions: 'Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On.'" Art: 21. 1 December 2006 <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/clip1.html>.

Figure 13

The Emancipation Approximation, 1999-2000

Scenes from *The Emancipation Approximation* shock the viewer with their violence, and also show the interracial desire to incorporate the best aspects of the "other" as a perverse form of miscegenation. In one silhouette, Walker portrays a swan mating with what appears to be a black girl in the sky; and in other sections of the murals white swans swim wearing the decapitated heads of blacks. The human/animal split in this latter scene evokes black versus white constructs and the desire of both to put on aspects of the other. The slave becomes white as her black head

becomes positioned on the swan's body and the white silhouette (the swan) becomes black by taking on the black head. Though there is a black figure standing by a chopping block in the back left, the scene is deliberately ambiguous about who is incorporating whom. Is the white swan taking on the black head or is the black head taking on the white body? Who is in control and what benefits are being received through the addition? Here, Walker plays with our representation of racial mixing, one where the end result is something hybrid, half black, half white; half human, and half animal.[101] Thus, the desire to acquire the exotic traits of the "other" becomes a form of miscegenation as the traits actually are put on. The means by which this incorporation happens is via the chopping block, which suggests the violence bred by not only the institution of slavery, but inherent in the desire to incorporate.[102] This very same desire is the cause of both Dr. Frankenstein's downfall and the creature's feelings of alienation and humility in Shelley's Frankenstein.

The story of "Leda and the Swan" is a Greek myth which captured the attention of artists and writers alike. It is the story of Leda, the wife of the king of Sparta, and her subsequent rape by Zeus, who transformed himself into a swan and came to lie with her. According to later Greek mythology, Leda bore Helen and Polydeuces, children of Zeus, as well as bearing Castor and Clytemnestra, children of her husband Tyndareus, the

[101] Dixon 2002, 17.
[102] Dixon 2002, 19.

King of Sparta. The subject was popular during the Renaissance and has been picked up by Walker for its eroticism and shock value.[103]

William Butler Yeats's sonnet, "Leda and the Swan" describes the details of a story from Greek mythology. It is a violent, sexually explicit poem that touches on ideas about the nature of the universe, the relationship between human and divine, and the cycles of history. Both Yeats's poem and *Leda and the Swan* by Michelangelo show the rippling out effect of a single event to the larger world. After all, the result of the Zeus's assault on Leda is the birth of Helen of Troy, which subsequently leads to destruction of early Greek civilization, and the beginning of the modern era.[104] This connection between power and history is touched on time and time again by Walker, who explores the ways in which American history, specifically the Civil War, knowingly and unknowingly affects the lives of many people.

Walker uses myths and literary legends from a tradition considered to be "white" and European. The two traditions, African and American and White European, are hybridized in her work. This can also be seen in her silhouettes, which visually show the melding of the Western genre of 19th century portrait painting silhouettes with the antebellum South. "Leda and the Swan" is about one being overpowered by another sexually, which

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[103] "Leda and the Swan: Introduction." Poetry for Students v. 13. 1998 eNotes.com ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 20 April 2007 <http://www.enotes.com/leda-swan/25276>.

[104] It has also been suggested that the poem, first written during the Irish Civil War of 1922–1923, is in reaction to the violence that beset Yeats's homeland during that time.

causes the birth of something else. Helen ushers in the end of myth and the beginning of history with the Trojan War. So, though there is guilt inherent in desiring the other, Walker recognizes that we're all hybrids of history, too.

Though both Kara Walker and Joseph Beuys believe very strongly in the capacity of art to introduce change, Walker's approach is somewhat more accusatory and pessimistic, more of an exposé, than Beuys's. While Beuys maintains many of these exposé elements, his art, as an aggregate, has much more of an optimistic, idealistic feel to it. For example, Walker's depiction of four females suckling one another easily draws attention to perverse lust and possible prurient interest on the part of the viewer. Walker's art seems to almost encourage this surfacing of one's own inherited ideas of history and racism. As is obvious by the work, not all the figures even seem capable or likely of being mothers. What then comes of the sexualizing of the not-yet-mature female body? The bastardization of the female mechanism for rejuvenation is thus shown to be an ongoing corruption, crossing generations and gender lines. Kara Walker tells,

> As I dredge, I'm often surprised about what comes up and what seems an up-holding of my own invention—what seems connected to a series of representations of the vulgar as paired with the blackness that have already existed and have been regurgitated over several hundred years, or over a history of African-Americana.[105]

[105] "Projection fictions: 'Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On.'" Art: 21. 2006.

In many of her pieces, Walker demonstrates the link between racism and sexuality, and illustrates how much further American society has to go. Her work tells us that we are not over the race issue. Not even by a long shot.

Though Kara Walker is very much interested in generations and the telling of history, she translates the past into the present and tries to deal with real life in the here and now.[106] As Kara Walker explains, she does not shut up "the whole ancestor idea, of ghosts," but is interested in what they may or may not have to offer. She says, "I have decided to not let them be quiet and to engage the potential ghosts."[107] After all, her titles seem to be merely a strange stream of words, with each title repeating the things before. There are hardly any verbs, but only nouns, suggesting no active progression, just a stating of things as they are.[108] Walker's work, *Emancipation Approximation*, seems to imply that the emancipation or promise of change has not happened fully. Yet by pointing out the lack of change the title also begs for change. Though inclusive of verbs, Beuys's titles, like *Show Your Wound*, demand immediate action and change. Both Beuys and Walker see their role as artist as central to society's struggle for greater justice and humanity and both believe that they can affect change through their art. Walker, however, is less explicit about how exactly one should do that. She merely suggests that the first and most vital step

[106] Golden, Thelma. Pictures From Another Time. ed. Annette Dixon. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002) 46.

[107] Golden 2002, 49.
[108] Golden 2002, 45.

would be to acknowledge our own racial prejudices and fears. In addition, Walker doesn't get directly involved in politics, as Beuys did. Likewise, Beuys helped found the German Green Party with Petra Kelley and Heinrich Böll in 1983 and becomes interested in education, all ways of enacting solid change in the present and future.[109] Beuys, with his practical and grounded approach, is more specific, he says "silence is overrated." Walker, too, makes the ghosts speak because she recognizes the potential in dialogue. For Beuys, discourse and debate are central, one should talk! And for him political activism is a key place of enacting change.

Materials and Format

Both Joseph Beuys and Kara Walker shock their audiences in many ways, especially Walker through her violent and sexualized images. Though Walker and Beuys have similar notions about art's importance in the world, the materials with which they hoped to achieve this differ drastically. Walker is famous for her large silhouettes, while Beuys is renowned for his use of unconventional materials, such as felt and fat. However, in both cases there is some element of shock in the framing and use of the materials, which follows both artists' like desire to galvanize their audiences.

[109] Mewes, Horst. "The West German Green Party." New German Critique, No. 28. (New York: New German Critique, 1983) 51. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0094033X%28198324%290%3A28%3C51%3ATWGGP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-R>.

Beuys's art was initially experienced as highly provocative in his West German context. His works sought to engage the contemporary art-going public by stunning viewers and promoting reflection on art and its role in the modern world. Both Walker and Beuys use their materials to evoke thought and reflection which causes the spectator to ask, "How can this be art?" Beuys accomplishes this with his sometimes very ugly vitrines and with his unusual materials such as fat, rotting meat, etc.

Walker, on the other hand, achieves a similar shock with her bold and overpowering silhouettes that demand attention and consideration. She talks of her art as deliberately provocative, saying, "My works are explicitly erotic, shameless. I would like visitors to stand in front of my work and feel just a little bit ashamed."[110] Though she is most renowned for her cut-paper silhouettes, she also employs painting, narrative vignettes and cyclorama, a large, cylindrical painting, drawing, text-based works, light projections, video, film, and performance.[111] Further proof of her artistic dexterity is her recent use of coffee as a medium, which also shows her similar liking of unusual materials with symbolic meaning.

The enormous size of many of Walker's silhouettes demonstrates the magnitude of the problems depicted in them. Her works complement the rhythmic pattern of history by emphasizing its enormous scope, one that is

[110] "Kara Walker-Sammlung Deutsche Bank." 17 May-7 July 2002. 2 February 2007 <http://www.deutsche-bank-kunst.com/guggenheim/alt/english/presse/p>.
[111] "The Art of Kara Walker. A Companion to the Exhibition: Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love." Walker Art Center. 18 April 2007 <http://learn.walkerart.org.karawalker/Main/TechniquesAndMEDIA>.

too often viewed by society in a much narrower frame. Kara Walker refuses to restrict herself to the incredibly small array of politically correct representations of black figures. Instead, she utilizes tools and figures associated with a charged past. She believes that people can attempt to create a noble history for themselves, but that ultimately they cannot escape their inherited past and the tools at their disposal, which are already loaded with meaning.[112] Representing this aspect of her art is *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole' (sketches from Plantation Life),"* which tells a story in the round, presenting the silhouettes in a 360-degree installation. Cyclorama is "a pictorial representation, in perspective, of a landscape, battle, etc., on the inner wall of a cylindrical room or hall, viewed by spectators occupying a position in the center."[113] *Slavery! Slavery!* was influenced by a 400-foot cyclorama of the infamous Civil War conflict, the *Battle of Atlanta*, that Walker saw during her youth in Atlanta, Georgia. Walker's use of the cyclorama allows the viewer to participate directly in the story, and encourages a more dynamic, fuller encounter. It also generates a continuous narrative, one that doesn't start on the left and end on the right.[114]

Walker achieves a similar effect with her use of light projections. Similar to Beuys's incorporation of the viewer in his work *Beuys's Block*

[112] Dixon 2002, 28.
[113] Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary,Random House, Inc. 2006.
[114] "The Art of Kara Walker. A Companion to the Exhibition: Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love."

(1968), Walker uses an overhead project in her work, *Darkytown Rebellion* (2001), to throw colored light on the ceiling, walls, and floor of her installations so that the viewer's body casts a shadow on the walls, mingling art and non-art, viewer and viewed, into a single work. Viewers are literally involved in the narrative as their shadows create new silhouettes. Walker explains in an interview with Susan Sollins in 2003, "I wanted to activate the space in a way."[115] This synthesis and unity of life and art is at the core of Beuys's artistic manifesto as well,--he saw all of society as art.

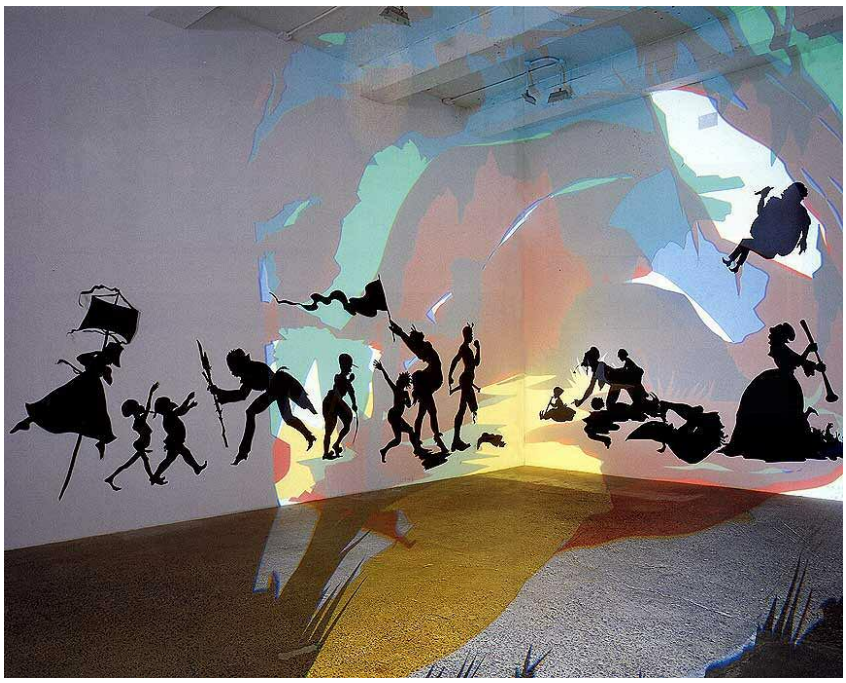
Walker's refusal to stagnate in her media is seen as well in her complex approach to the form of her art. The silhouettes are intended to shock the viewer, with their clean and defined edges between black and white portraying scenes of sexual or physical violence and manipulation of the body. Kara Walker tells Marion Ackermann, director of the Art Museum Stuttgart, Germany, in the interview, "Snared by Form," how her large silhouettes "subvert our finely tuned, comfortably adjusted cultural dogmas."[116]

[115] The Art of Kara Walker. A Companion to the Exhibition: Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love."
[116] Ackermann 2003, 71.

Figure 14

Darkytown Rebellion, 200

Installation view at Brent Sikkema, New York



Walker refuses to be controlled by inherited stereotypes and wants her audience to be enlightened too. This is evident in her very graphic, shocking, and often offensive depiction of sex, violence, and black/white, female/male relationships. *An Abbreviated Emancipation* is a work wrought with sexual insinuation and violation and shows scenes of men sucking women's breasts, a swan inserting his beak into a woman, and so on.[117] *An Abbreviated Emancipation* (2002), from *The Emancipation Approximation*, is a series of large black cut-paper silhouettes that

[117] Moshenson 2003, 22.

narrates, often grotesquely, the sexual nightmare endured by African-Americans under slavery. Walker does not put these silhouettes on display to glorify or shame these figures or their historical counterparts, but to help her viewers understand how physical intimacy (sex) and domination (violence) may be two sides of the same coin. The use of silhouettes allows for some ambiguity as to the true "color" of the figures, but in profile they often becomes racial, as "black" silhouettes are defined by big lips and butts. In addition, each viewer brings a unique lens to the viewing of her work, which is often deliberately left ambivalent.

For this reason, if the silhouettes in this piece are taken to be a white male and black female, then as a white viewer looking at a black artist's work, ideas of master-servant interracial fears would probably come into play and shift the focus from one of physical intimacy to one of domination and violence. There is present throughout Walker's work the theme of sex between unequal parties in a corrupt economic system based on gain. In this system one race is "owned" for the other's gain and the black woman is consigned to the role of breeder, with the slave master gaining increased plantation production and the slave woman a placement within the house. Thus sexual pleasure becomes a medium of exchange between whites and blacks. It is about domination and subjugation. As critic Annette Dixon, points out, "It evokes slavery's imbalance of power and the role of sexuality and forced breeding in that system of power." This gets played out in scenes such as this one and others of seduction,

copulation, sexual relations.[118] Walker, always refusing a didactic approach to matters of identity, history, and art, uses this image, like all her images, to conjure up the disconcerting aspects of history.

Beuys's work, too, has many layers, many of which are just as violent as Walker's, and yet they have more of a subtle threat of violence than Walker's. Beuys's own rendering of the leitmotif of death is usually conveyed through objects or forms lying horizontally on the ground, implying corpses and can be seen in *The Pack*, which featured a group of sled carrying fat, and *Show Your Wound* (1980). The style and choice of media in this room installation, featuring two operating tables, two abstract pieces of art, and two newspapers with the heading *Show Your Wound,* illustrates Beuys's successful balance in portraying the brutality of the Holocaust without going so far as to give direct photographic representation. For this reason, Beuys's effect comes out just as strongly as Walker's, but in a slightly less direct way. The German people's outraged reactions to part of the "environment" or installation, such as the fat, just reaffirmed the director of the Gallery's opinion that the piece is about repression and taboos. This, too, outlines very closely what Walker's *Emancipation Approximation* and her other works are about. Many of Walker's audiences, especially portions of the black community, respond negatively and critically to this "shock" approach, as did many of Beuys's fellow Germans.

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[118] Dixon 2002, 13.

Last March (2006) Kara Walker took up a new challenge, presenting an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art which combined her work with pieces from the Met to examine the connections between race and poverty. The exhibition came about after Gary Tinterow, the curator in charge of the museum's newly formed department of 19th-century, modern and contemporary art, issued a carte-blanche invitation to Walker allowing her to use one of the underutilized mezzanine galleries in the Metropolitan's 20th-century wing. The installation, *After the Deluge* is largely a response to Hurricane Katrina, the resulting poverty, and the marginalization of many of the black Americans affected.[119] It is similar to Beuys's installations in that it uses diverse materials and innovative positioning to generate new perceptions. She chose a selection of mostly American 19th-century paintings and cut-paper silhouettes, punctuated by some of her own works. Though Beuys's installations would have consisted of a mixture of different everyday substances, rather than famous paintings, common to both is the artist's openness to representation.

119 Smith, Roberta. "Kara Walker Makes Contrasts in Silhouette in Her Own Met Show." Sikkema Jenkins & Co. 24 March 2006 <http://www.sikkemajenkinsco.com/karawalker.html>.

Figure 15

After the Deluge, 2006

Generational History

History is, to both Walker and Beuys, a matter of extreme importance. Both feel that history must be understood and dealt with in order to live in the world of the present. Their difference in approach is a result of the fact that they hail from different countries, continents and generations. Walker was born in 1964, not fully maturing until after a lot of the awful struggles of the Civil Rights Movement were over, while Beuys, born in 1921, was just becoming a young man at the height of Hitler's power and served in the German *Luftwaffe*. It seems, once again, for this reason that Walker is so much more consumed with the notion of inherited guilt and history, while Beuys focuses on forgiveness, redemption, and nostalgia.

Walker's portrayal of history contains much generational analysis and emphasis on the present. She believes that it is not enough to hope for

change in later generations, for the concept of progress is a myth and with every succeeding generation comes a greater build-up of cultural prejudices.[120] Her work is all about the now. She explores the danger in running from the past in her work, *Untitled (),* by having the central female figure about to squish her black baby as she runs from a hut. This scene reflects her recognition of the possibility of trampling later generations in the desperate attempt to get free from the past.[121]

In *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995)*,* we see a work that exhibits generational ties through four female figures (of decreasing ages) suckling each other's breasts. The figures are judged to be African American and the Negress here, Kara Walker's alter ego and silhouette heroine, is seen as a figure of nurture or strength. She is a black mammy in many of the scenes in *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, but represents here the capacity of black females to care for each other. Adding to Walker's own explanation that this scene refers to one's need to suckle from history, writer Annette Dixon makes the argument in her book, Pictures From Another Time, that the suckling refers as well to "the succor that can come from reliance on archetypes of strength embedded in stereotypes."[122] The image is packed with meaning, but focuses at the core on the generational exchange that takes place, or does not take place,

[120] Reid-Pharr, Robert F. Pictures From Another Time. 41.
[121] Richards 2003, 13.

[122] Dixon 2002, 14.

between community members. She seems to find this to be at the root of the telling of history and gives examples of the frustration of this exchange, the success, the violence shown to it. Regardless, however, it points to that which is essential to Walker's notion of identity, the question of "inheritance."

Unlike Walker, Beuys is less personally focused on questions of generation, and more focused on feelings of nostalgia, and remembrance. Beuys's themes of mourning and even nostalgia come from his metaphorical and physical wounded condition. Coming himself from the war generation, Beuys was more plagued by feelings of remorse and internal division than with a generational divide. Beuys and Walker do share a similarity here, for Walker, too, talks of loss of innocence when she moved from California to Georgia as a teenager. Both acknowledge the very strong effects of place on one's psyche and self-identification. Beuys explores this in a detailed way in his piece *Economic Values*, a readymade consisting of stockpiled goods from the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). In regard to generations, perhaps Beuys's actions in the present were intended to diminish the negative effects of the war on later generations, such as the German artists Anselm Kiefer, Sigmar Polke, and Gerhard Richter, who learned much from Beuys. Or perhaps Beuys just identified most with his fellow Germans for they had experienced it together. Regardless, Beuys uses history more as a starting

point, as a material itself. It is the source and he is the one who can tap into it and open it up for the world.

Beuys explained the role of his artistic process in dealing with history citing Robert Steiner's Three Fold Commonwealth and emphasizing both the cognitive process, as well as action. It is in both of these areas that art has a role. It can be the medium through which people retrieve things lost in the past. Walker, too, addresses cognitive processes in the way she wants the viewer to react.[123] Her work deliberately challenges viewers to respond both internally with thought and emotion and externally with expression.

Identity: What is Inherited

Walker's idea of identity is intimately wrapped up in the portrayal of the female body, for it is the source of life and heritage. There is innate guilt, hereditary talent, and sometimes a sense of an inherited struggle, all of which the individual has no control over, and which come with a previously prescribed historical judgment. In an interview, Kara Walker tells Liz Armstrong in regard to the silhouette of the four women suckling, "For myself I have this constant battle-this fear of weaning. It's really a battle that I apply to the black community as well, because all of our progress is predicated on having a very tactile link to a brutal past."[124] It

[123] Harlan 2004, 96.
[124] Armstrong, Liz. "Kara Walker." No Place Like Home. ed. Kathleen Mclean. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997) 113.

is clear then that though Walker affirms the undeniable and inescapable link to the past—to history, she still finds it to be problematic. It is not something that people living in the twenty-first century, black or white, can be entirely free from and to say that we should be free from it because of how long it has been is wrong too, for progress is a myth. Walker continues saying, "I think really the whole problem with racism and its continued legacy in this country is that we simply love it. Who would we be without it and without the 'struggle'?"[125]

In the late 20th Century Germany no one was talking about "their" struggle. It was still too fresh. Beuys was not an obedient subscriber to Adorno's call for silence, but instead urged dialogue and an active facing of one's past, through the present. Even to this day, the Germans practice a policy of silence that is not to be found in the African American community in the United States. In works such as *Show Your Wound* and *Economic Values,* Beuys exposed the very taboos that were repressing and hindering German society from moving on in the world. He wanted controversy and discussion, personal sharing and opening up. His works were meant to show his viewer's how truly closed off they were. Walker, too, promotes public acknowledgement of race issues because when these issues remained invisible if kept in the private. She uncovers human attachment to the past, even ones filled with bad. Walker shows that one

[125] Armstrong 1997, 107.

can't reject the past without questioning ourselves. It is on this point that Beuys and Walker share their most important similarity.

Self-Portraiture

Kara Walker, as an artist, places herself in the role of social crusader, attempting to expose the way in which media and literature construct history. Another notable aspect of her artistic style is that her work resists cohesion or conclusion. She does not seek clear answers, but finds promise and value in a result or work which is much more complex and informing for the viewer. This is very similar to the Beuys's use of hermeneutic undecidabilty and shows Walker's love for contradiction. When asked what art is for, she answered "Figuring it out," showing both her modesty in her role as an artist and in a double meaning, positing art as a sphere in which one can find meaning, even if it is a struggle.[126] It is interesting to note that when Kara Walker was asked in an interview about her feelings on race issues, she found it hard to respond, saying merely that she wasn't much of a politician. Not just being humble or coy, she is showing the difficulty of expressing verbally something that is so complicated for her. For her, it's very visual. She started her response with, "It's never been anything I can verbalize well." As one can see by

[126] "Questionnaire: Kara Walker." Frieze.com.

looking at Beuys, Walker is not alone in her advocacy for the saliency of art in times of trauma, reconciliation, and memory.[127]

Walker's art is realistic, even if rather weird and grotesque. Similar to Walker's use of inherited stereotypes, Beuys appropriated early-twentieth-century artistic strategies utilized by Dada, constructivist, and surrealist artists in order to partially negate the aesthetic object and to empower their audience.[128] He often uses readymade images and objects to undermine postwar expressive and constructive models of abstraction, one example being *Economic Values* (1980). *Economic Values* consists of packets of foodstuffs and other basic products purchased in the former German Democratic Republic.

Beuys differs from Walker in his view of the media, in that he used it strategically to further his aims as an artist and as a tool to disseminate his message of harmony and self determination to the world. While Beuys wants a re-making of his viewer, ultimately Walker aims at a retraining of her audience through her controversial and graphic silhouettes.[129] She uses stereotypes in order to undercut their power over herself and her audience. The power to create and the capacity for creation is alike, however, to Walker's and Beuys's notion of their role as artists.

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[127] "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." MoMA.org.
[128] Biro, Matthew. "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust." 118.
[129] Dixon 2002, 28.

[129] Dixon 2002, 28.

In her 1997 paper installation, *World's Exposition,* Walker explores how she produces as an artist and figure in the piece, and "reproduces" memory. The installation features eleven or so figures, with the prominent ones being a woman/creature hanging from a tree, painting or drawing of some kind, a woman chiseling at a man's neck in the center, and then slightly to the right of center a woman with a baby suckling at her breast. All of these three female figures have some form of agency. The woman/creature in the upper left corner has the power to create through painting/drawing, the woman in the center has the power to destroy because of her chisel, and the woman to the right of center has the power to conceive and thus affect history by her children. Her ability to provide milk becomes her tool. Important here to note is the figure in the upper left corner, the woman/creature hanging from the tree, which is widely accepted as the "Negress," Walker's alter ego.

Figure 16

World's Exposition, 1997

Though put on display for the male gaze, Kara Walker gives the Negress, the heightened female figure, agency in the ability to create,

while simultaneously ruining the male worship of her by having her defecate. It's as if she is saying, when you worship this figure, what do you worship? As Walker confesses, this "alter ego of the Negress who performs as a silhouettist has a pen knife: a weapon that enables her to sublimate her urge to kill by wreaking her revenge in visual vignettes based on both history and fantasy."[130] The desire for the artist to kill is seen then in the central woman's beheading of the male figure. If we take the figure hanging from the tree in the top left to be the figure of Kara Walker, the artist, then the two other female silhouettes come to embody her ability as an artist to both create (as seen by the mammy/mother) and destroy (the central woman). Art then is another form of media and hence of control which gives Kara Walker a power that she is very conscious of.

Similarly, in *The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire-A Reconstruction* (1995), Kara Walker explains that the Negress represents a semi-artificial artist attempting to usurp power from everybody. It was her first piece in Atlanta and she states that it resulted from years of denial and building up of bad associations, feelings, vibes, etc. In some way, she wanted to make up for the absent 19th-century Negress artist. She wanted to take that place, but knew her inability to do that. She seems unable to assume the role of the 19th-century black woman artist both because of her distance from the time period and because this woman artist belongs to a tradition that never

[130] Dixon 2002, 19.

existed, or is no longer existing today. In the end, she is taking on a role.[131]

Kara Walker's "urge to kill" is one that is both directed at the media and furthered by her use of the media, making herself complicit in her own critique of media. Her own attention to these urges and boldness in exposing and displaying them in her artwork connects her to the viewer by self-indictment. Like a mother, the artist is a creator too. In addition, Walker shows how powerful the role of an artist can be in producing representations of history.[132] The use of "reproduce" inevitably reminds us of female reproduction and childbearing. Both in the end can be creators of history.

Figure 17

The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire-A Reconstruction,1995

As an artist, Kara Walker refuses to give cohesion to a history that is full of chaos and ongoing ramifications. She says, "There's an

[131] "Conversations with Contemporary Artists." MoMA.org.
[132] Dixon, Annette. Pictures From Another Time. 33.

understanding within America about where that resolution is…where things resolve in a way and a female heroine actualizes through a process of self-discovery and historical discovery and comes out from under her oppressors and maybe doesn't become a hero, but is a hero for herself."[133] Walker's pieces defy that kind of false unity, claiming that "to some extent there's a failure for that kind of resolution." For when a synthesis and neat conclusion is developed, then one stops engaging in self questioning and history and self are simplified and become stagnant. Walker's art "demands reparation but expects no apology." She talks of the necessary failure to find a voice—official, vernacular, or personal—adequate to express the experience of "surviving" the master-slave dialectic.[134] Her views clearly talk about "projecting fictions" into facts, but nonetheless ultimately reflect a truer representation of human history. She believes that history is a collusion of fiction and fact and talks of her personal philosophy as "a will toward chaos or a will toward attempting resolution with the certainty that chaos reigns." Her work doesn't attempt to reach a clear conclusion, rather it acknowledges that it will not come. Inherent in her philosophy is a redefining of progress as a myth, for her experiences show her that the passing of time doesn't guarantee forward thinking or improvement.

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[133] "Projection fictions. 'Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On.'" Art: 21. 2006.
[134] Israel, Nico. "Kara Walker:Brent Sikkema-Reviews." New York. November 2002

For Walker, it is the role of the artist to expose stereotypes and deflate stereotypes. In many of her works, Walker deliberately plays with and banks on the viewer's ability to think in stereotypes and to racially profile. Unlike Beuys, her work exaggerates, through two-dimensionality, the very subject. It is these two-dimensional silhouettes that heighten a sense of uncontainable pain. It is as if her subjects are left "pinned and wriggling on the wall." This is unlike Beuys's, who embraces sculpture and any art that resists stagnancy and flatness. So whereas Beuys models his style after his goal, Walker uses that which she hopes to overthrow as her preferred medium.[135]

The work, *Camptown Ladies* (1998), for example shows how white desire to incorporate perceived "black" qualities via suckling is frustrated. As the black female figure stands victorious, displaying her strong, healthy, milk-producing body she denies the white woman her wish, which is to incorporate "black vitality." One comes to see then that the link between black and vitality is yet another ingrained stereotype. The work shows a central black figure, though clearly in possession of some healthy milk (as evidenced by the large spurt coming from her breast) instead feeding the supplicating white woman waste from a baby. Thus, the black figure denies the white woman her fantasy of obtaining a perceived black vigor and vivacity. Still, the woman's milk is shown to be

[135] Israel 2002.

spontaneously and uncontrollably spurting out of her, reaffirming "white" ideas that African-Americans have greater animation and life than their white counterparts. This plays into ideas of white women as being much more sterile and weak, in contrast to notions of black female strength and raw nourishment.

Kara Walker's clothing of the two different figures in *Camptown Ladies*, with the central "black" figure's strong features detailed and highlighted by the absence of clothes and the white woman covered up, mimics the common representation of each woman according to her ethnic background. The two little figures on the right reiterate this point, with the "black" character offering basic nourishment, in the holding up of a carrot, while the little "white" girl only has destruction and war to offer with her sling shot. The "black" figure is thus shown triumphant in that she refuses to play into white fantasies that both men and women have about black female vitality, which is closely linked to maternity. The Negress, after all, is often portrayed as a black mammy or nurse to white children in the South. Still as viewers we must question how much we, ourselves, subscribe to those stereotypes. We are often left "trapped and wriggling," too, because Walker doesn't offer alternatives or give answers.

Beuys sees the artist as the hope for world change. He famously declared that "everyone was an artist" and instituted social sculpture where the world was sculpture. In his controversial installation, *Show Your Wound*, art holds the central upper space in the room, "as if art itself

is transcendent."[136] The openness of Beuys's art and Beuys's call for dynamism challenges Adorno's 1949 dictum that implied abstraction in art was the only feasible way to attempt to address the horrors of the Holocaust. As one of Beuys's good friends and colleague explained of Beuys's approach and aim, "When you put your finger on the sore point-on the wound-you clarify a problem; you get to the heart of the matter."[137] Beuys sees himself as a crusader as a redeemer sent to bring new life to a world wrecked by a terrible war.

Treatment of Memory

Walker asks basic questions about American identity and shows how memory is always filtered through contemporary anxieties and prejudices.[138] She questions the representation that there is a clear and constant connection between current and past generations of Black African, enslaved Africans, and African Americans, as well as between white Americans and white slave owners. Can one distinguish "real" history from the representations and fantasies fabricated by both whites and blacks alike about ethnic and racial identity in America?[139] She believes that she has been informed (probably since day one) by a collusion of fact and fiction. As critic, Reid-Pharr, explains, "Walker's protagonist…cannot deny the materiality of the 'artifacts' that give her

[136] Rosenthal 2004, 74.
[137] Stachelhaus 1991, 162.
[138] Reid-Pharr 2002, 37.
[139] Reid-Pharr 2002, 32.

access to her own black past."[140] We are reminded that identity is not a thing that comes fully formed, but a shaky structure that must be constantly questioned and updated. For Kara Walker, this is both a very personal experience and also one she recognizes to be a universal truth that is hidden under false representation. Kara Walker seeks to lift up that veil. She believes art has the capacity to make tangible the gap between what is, what was and what might be, and makes the claim that it is in the gap that something like "truth" or "reconciliation" can begin to be imagined.[141] She is just as concerned with demonstrating how we produce and "reproduce memory," as she is with deflating stereotypes.[142] Reid-Pharr outlines the basic differences between Walker and Betye Saar, an avid critic of Walker's work. He explains how Saar understands memory as visceral and racial, whereas Walker sees memory and history composed of rather tainted cultural artifacts produced more in media and by historians than within any black freedom movement.[143]

Beuys, like his fellow Germans, struggled with the crisis of memory and an epidemic of forgetting. Douglas Fogle, in his article "Volatile Memories," argues that remembrance is intimately tied to a sense of place.[144] Beuys's installation*, Tempo Erbsen,* explores the "aesthetic investigation of that migratory 'no place' that constitutes the global condition of late modernity, where people, objects, and memories

[140] Reid-Pharr 2002, 33.
[141] Israel 2002.
[142] Reid-Pharr 2002, 33.
[143] Reid-Pharr 2002, 38.
[144] Fogel 1997, 117.

float across seas of forgetfulness."[145] It is this tension between travel and home, memory and forgetting that suffuse Beuys' work with its evocative powers, "placing the dreamlike space of utopia (literally 'no place') at the core of the modern human condition."[146] Charity Scribner, in her article "Object, Relic, Fetish, Thing," talks about art curators' difficulty in sorting through post-Wende debris.[147] She points to the lingering sense that something was lost with the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc and argues that as the two Germanys unify into one, the customs and culture of the Western half are eclipsing those of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Scribner focuses a lot on art curator, Andreas Ludwig, and makes links to Joseph Beuys in regards to his installation *Economic Values (Wirtschaftswerte*)—an assemblage that combines VEB products (Volkseigener Betrieb) with a small sculpture of Beuys's own design.[148]

Beuys's fearless exploration of memory and overt representations of mourning and nostalgia served as a signal to the art world of the many existing diaspora and to later artists about the importance of art as the voice for those who had suffered, perished in, or survived the horrors of World War II.[149] Matthew Biro in his essay, "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust," explores the relationship between representation and event in the work of

[145] Fogel 1997, 118.
[146] Fogel 1997, 118.
[147] This refers to the post-communist turn with official reunification on October, 3 1990 in Germany.
[148] VEB stands for the legal people-owned enterprises in East Germany
[149] Rosenthal 2004, 100.

German artists Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys. It focuses on the way in which Kiefer and Beuys engage in the paradoxes of Holocaust representation, which lies in the battle between the moral imperative to remember and the impossibility of representation a past that is by its scope and horror unable to be clearly represented.[150]

CONCLUSION

Kara Walker challenges both herself and her viewer in her work. Even the words on this page are an affirmation of racial stereotypes in some ways. Here, and in most all books, black is portrayed as a minority in a sea of white writing. Though of course we don't see this literally as espousing prejudice against blacks, when we encounter an artist such as Kara Walker, and the book, Kara Walker by Stephan Richards, which contains black pages and white writing, we become aware of the degree to which the white/black split pervades our world. Why does the color reversal in Richard's book seem so strange and why does the book take on an ominous feel when we are confronted with pages of black with only bits of white scattered throughout? The answer to these questions is one that is both personal and complicated. Kara Walker is an important and vital figure both in the art world and beyond because she constantly challenges her viewers to look at the construction of their identity. My

[150] Biro, Matthew. "Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust." 118-121.

writing about her and the conclusions I've drawn represent a participation in this self-indicting experience. We must fill in the white spaces.

Likewise, Beuys presented a serious challenge to both Germans and all humans after the Second World War; he challenged all peoples everywhere to reexamine their treatment of memory and to acknowledge the importance of dialogue and critical examination in reconciliation. Beuys received his fair share of criticism, especially early on, but has since gained cult status in Germany and is revered for his art and public works. Kara Walker remains a highly successful, but also highly controversial figure within the black community. Many feel that she is digging up old hurts and putting them on display for the world in an ugly and injurious manner. To them her work is humiliating and insulting. And yet the wider world is hailing her work, giving her prestigious honors such as the Lucelia Artist Award, which is awarded to a leading contemporary American artist younger than fifty. Will Kara Walker ever achieve success within her own community as Joseph Beuys did? Will her success extend beyond the label "African American Art"? In the last chapter, I sought to outline the two artists' artistic philosophies, personal goals, and style.

It would seem natural for Kara Walker's success to be slow coming, for she wants to explode open each person's"dark alley," where all ugly thoughts and feelings lie. She challenges her viewers, posing them with the question: "What's inside you that you don't want to know

about?" What is so unique about Kara Walker's situation then is that she, unlike Beuys, received international acclaim quite quickly receiving the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Achievement Award while still in her late twenties. It is interesting to know then that it is from the black community that she finds most of her critics.

In an article entitled, "I Hate Being Lion Fodder", Kara Walker and author Darius James talk about the criticism directed at their work and about the widespread usage of erotically charged racist stereotypes in the media. Darius James is the author of Negrophobia, a book written in 1992, one which caused much controversy for its reflections upon the subconscious, the dreams and fears of America marked by a subliminal racism. Darius James actually lives in Germany and he and Walker find similar reactions to their work among Germans and Americans. Walker discusses the American public's response to her and the letter-writing campaigns enacted against her. The first letter campaign came after being awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 1997 and the second in petition for the removal of one of her prints from a museum in Detroit.[151]

Analogous to Walker's work, James's book met with criticism within the black civil rights movement, illustrating how even in Germany there is still a feeling of desire and fear in a the racialized image. James and Walker cite advertisements as a source of frequent stereotyping. They mentioned one in which a black woman towers over a man offering her a

[151] "I Hate Being Lion Fodder." Db-art.info. An Interview / Conversation via Email Between Darius James and Kara Walker. 19 April 2007 <http://www.deutsche-bank-kunst.com/art/02/e/magazin-interview-walker.php>.

cigarette. She is laughing, apparently at the idea that he is offering her such a small object. James believes the image of the woman to be a projection of white male sexual fantasy, with white male sexual inadequacy also implied by the image. This, they both agree, is an example of desire and fear encompassed in a single image. Walker attacks and unveils media's use of stereotypes in advertising to get us to buy things and forget our troubles. Walker opposes this in her art.

Walker was also heavily criticized in the International Review of African American Arts. Walker notes with disdain that the International Review of African American Arts focused their critique largely on her hair and her white husband, rather than on the art. Once again, Walker makes the observation that race and sexuality are not divorced from one another in the American imagination, not even among the black community. Even institutions and publications supposedly devoted to the ending of racist stereotypes, like the International Review, fall victim to the racist imagery.[152] Walker, though, is not afraid to tackle painful subjects.

Walker's international success is something that her critics find so disturbing, for they see it as Walker being praised for showcasing them, their struggle, to the world.[153] Interesting, as well is that Kara Walker's search for inner ugliness manifests itself quite beautifully. Though the content of her silhouettes is usually disturbing and violent, the actually silhouettes themselves, with their smooth shapes and defined profiles is

[152] "I Hate Being Lion Fodder." Db-art.info. 2007
[153] Gordon 2004, 161.

rather appealing. This is very unlike Beuys who finds it imperative to resist beauty in his work. For Beuys, the aesthetic would take away from the meaning, whereas for Walker, it is not only the remainder of being a painter, but also something that she feels is central to her message. She also says that her work becomes pretty because she wouldn't be able to look at a work about something as grotesque as what she's thinking about. She says that she has always been attracted to the lure, to the type of work which draws a viewer in through a kind of seductive offering.[154]

Beuys's daring new art-making process earned him criticism as well early on in his career. The criticism started in the 1960's when his Christian iconography started to become pantheistic. Though many of Beuys's earliest sculptures are religious in nature, he more and more embraced non-religious figures and animals—in particular, stags, bees, and swans. His use of non-religious figures and animals was especially high during his time of great physical and spiritual collapse in the mid- to late 1950's. Beuys's is criticized for using these animal figures drawn from Norse and Celtic myth for personal growth and for making himself into a Savior-like figure.[155] In addition, Beuys was attacked for mystifying the past and for promoting a new cult of the artist. The criticism intensified as Beuys opened war wounds by disregarding taboos and creating works that alluded to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

[154] "Projection fictions: 'Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On.'" Art: 21. 2006.

[155] Biro, Matthew. "The Art of Joseph Beuys." 2007.

Walker's use of her publicity to promote her work is another strategy also used by Beuys successfully. As they say in the business world, "bad publicity is good publicity," and both Walker and Beuys have been unafraid to hold back in their art. They have shocked, horrified, scandalized, and disgusted both their own communities and the general artistic world. Always, though, both Beuys and Walker have not left their work go unexplained. They both use the media aggressively to shape the "proper" reception of their work. Tons of sites can be found on Walker's art, all with long explanations or interviews connected. Almost all of Walker's exhibitions have a detailed description of her work and motivations, and like Beuys she has agreed to take many interviews in regard to her work. Beuys's determination to succeed, his confidence in his art, and his tireless conversing with any and all interviewers, reporters, fellow artists, and students played a huge role in his success and I think Kara Walker will be no wall flower either. I believe that if Kara Walker can stay in the media and continue to excite the world with her fresh representations of a continued historic legacy of prejudice than she will one day become a cult figure as Beuys is today.

Walker's critics contend that she is reaffirming stereotypes, but as author Avery F. Gordon points out, her art is by definition against the stereotype because it is antimanagerial. That is to say that her art brings up the complexities of the social and psychological relationships that turn people or groups into fetishes, rather than condensing the situation into an

"object form." A stereotype condenses, but Kara Walker refuses to give cohesion or to replace "negative absolutes with positive" ones. Walker accomplishes this through works like *After the Deluge* that challenge and provoke. As jealousies subside and a growing understanding of Walker's motivations and hopes comes, in conjunction with her artistic and personal maturity and use of the media, Kara Walker will prove her place in the American art scene.

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